RALPH *on the* MIDNIGHT FLYER

BY ALLEN CHAPMAN

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Carol Murphy

THE FIRE WAS SWEEPING CLOSER AND CLOSER.

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RALPH ON THE MIDNIGHT FLYER

OR

THE WRECK AT SHADOW VALLEY

BY

ALLEN CHAPMAN

AUTHOR OF "RALPH OF THE ROUNDHOUSE," "RALPH ON THE ARMY TRAIN," "THE RADIO BOYS' FIRST WIRELESS," "THE RADIO BOYS TRAILING A VOICE," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK
GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS

Made in the United States of America

BOOKS FOR BOYS
By Allen Chapman

12mo. Cloth. Illustrated.

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Ralph on the Midnight Flyer

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RALPH ON THE MIDNIGHT FLYER

CHAPTER I

THE TROUBLE-MAKER

"WHAT do you think, Ralph? Would any of our Great Northern employees be foolish enough to join this wildcat strike?"

"Well, what do you think yourself?" asked Ralph Fairbanks, with some impatience in his tone. "You know these roughnecks as well as I do."

The general manager, in whose office at Rockton they were sitting, threw up both hands and fairly snorted his disgust.

"I've been a long time at the railroad game," he declared; "but I never yet understood the psychology of a maintenance of way man. No, sir. In some things they are as loyal to the road as I am myself. And then they suddenly go off at a tangent because of something that, for the life of me, I cannot see is important."

"There lies the difficulty—the germ of the whole trouble," Ralph Fairbanks said thoughtfully.

He was a young fellow of attractive personality—good looking, too. The girls had begun to notice the young railroader, and had he not been so thoroughly devoted to his calling—and to the finest mother a fellow ever had—Ralph might have been somewhat spoiled by the admiration accorded him in certain quarters.

Just now, however, having been called in from the train dispatchers' department where he worked, the young fellow's attention was deeply engaged in the subject the general manager had brought up. Ralph was an extraordinary employee of the Great Northern. His superiors trusted him thoroughly. And having worked his way up from the roundhouse, switch tower, as fireman and engineer, to the train dispatcher's grade, he was often called upon by the railroad officials for special duties.

The general manager stared at the young fellow after his last remark for fully a minute before asking:

"What do you mean by that? What is the germ of the whole trouble?"

"The fact that the officials cannot see things just as the men see them."

"Oh!"

"No getting away from the fact that the laborer seldom looks at a thing as his superior looks at it," Ralph pursued earnestly. "A rule promulgated by some officer of the road seems to him the simplest way of getting at a needed result. But after it is spread on the board at the roundhouse, for instance, it creates a riot."

"So it does. And I am hanged if I have been able to understand in some cases why the men go off half-cocked over some simple thing."

"Not simple at all to them. It is often a rule that lops off some cherished privilege. It may be something that looks as though it were aimed at the laborer's independence."

"Bah!" ejaculated the general manager with more than a little disdain in his tone.

"You see!" laughed Ralph. "You can't see it in the same way that I can, for instance. You make an order, say, changing the style of the caps the men wear around the roundhouse and switch towers, and see what a row you'll have on your hands. Some 'lawyer' among 'em will see a deliberate attempt for somebody to graft—or worse. Those caps they get for a quarter and can buy in the little stores that crop up around every railroad yard. The hogheads and firemen wear them. Everybody wears them.

You order that the cap hereafter worn shall be quite different from the present cap, and you'll start something that you'll never be able to stop save by buckling down to the boys."

"But *why?*" demanded the official. "Tell me! What is the reason? Another cap might not cost them a penny more——"

"Or might not cost them as much. That would make no difference. You strike at his independence in changing the style of the cap. And his independence is the most cherished possession of the railroader. You should know that."

"I know that they *think* they are independent," growled the general manager. "But like the rest of us, they are just about as independent as the hog on the cake of ice."

The young train dispatcher laughed again. He could really appreciate the mental attitude of both the disgruntled railroad workers, at this time stirred up all over the country from ocean to ocean, and the higher officials of the road, who realized fully that unless all branches of the railroad pulled together during the next few months there would surely come financial wreckage to many systems.

The Great Northern was really in better circumstances than many trunk lines at the time.

But on the division the headquarters of which were here in Rockton, friction had developed. The shopmen talked strike; the yardmen were disgruntled; the section hands of the division talked more than they worked. Altogether the situation was so serious that the general manager himself found it necessary to look the field over.

And it was not strange that he should have called Ralph Fairbanks into conference. Young as the latter was, he was a link between the officials and the workmen at large.

"Look here, Ralph," said the general manager suddenly, swinging about in his chair with one leg over its arm and pointing his lighted cigar at the young fellow, "I'm going to ask you a pointed question. What do you think of Bart Hopkins?"

"Mr. Hopkins—the division super?" returned Ralph briskly and looking straight into the general manager's face. "I think that Mr. Hopkins has a lovely daughter. As the boys say, she's a peach!"

"No," replied the general manager gloomily, "she's a Cherry—a different kind of fruit. But I am not asking your opinion of Cherry Hopkins. How about Bart?"

"I guess I haven't been thinking much about him," confessed Ralph slowly. "He has been

here in charge for three months, and to tell the truth I have not spoken to him half-a-dozen times. He has nothing to do, of course, with the dispatchers' department. Mr. Hopkins is a pleasant-spoken man."

"You know blamed well that I am not asking, either, about Bart Hopkins' social qualities," said the exasperated general manager. "What do you think of him as a railroad man? What is he doing here?"

A flash of feeling came into Ralph Fairbanks' face and he looked steadily at his old friend and superior.

"What did you expect him to do here?"

"Confound it all! I don't want to be catechised. I want you to answer me. I want to know what you think of the man's work?"

"You want it straight, then, do you?" asked Ralph sharply.

"Yes, I do."

"Then I think he will end in setting everybody by the ears and bringing on a strike that may spread to every division of the Great Northern. You have forced this answer from me. Remember, you must not quote me."

"I won't snitch," said the general manager, with a wry grin. "I understand. Then you

take the men's view of Bart? You believe he is a trouble-maker?"

"As sure as you are two feet high!" exclaimed Ralph, with conviction.

"Huh! He has already brought about changes that have saved the division a mint of money."

"The other changes he has made will cost the road a good deal more—if there is a strike."

"Actually, do you believe there will be a strike, Ralph?"

"If Andy McCarrey has his way, there will be. And Mr. Hopkins is playing right into McCarrey's hands."

"I can't believe that Bart would deliberately do anything to bring on trouble."

"No. But he's been bitten by the efficiency bug. The swelling is a terrible one," said Ralph, smiling again. "Mr. Hopkins can't seem to see things at all from the men's standpoint. As I said before, an inability to see the effect of an order on the men's minds is the germ of most friction between the laborers and the railroad heads. McCarrey is a bad man. He wants to lead a strike. Naturally a strike will put a lot of money in McCarrey's hands. These strike leaders do as they please with strike funds—there is never any check on them.

"Besides, as I believe, he has a personal enmity for Mr. Hopkins. Somewhere in the East, where Hopkins came from, McCarrey got a grudge against him."

"Yes, I understand Barton Hopkins was in the middle of some trouble on the Eastern Shore Railroad. He is a stormy petrel. But he is making good here. He has saved us money," reiterated the general manager.

"Well, if money is more to the Great Northern than a loyal band of employees," said Ralph with some bitterness, as he got up from his chair, "then you have got just what you want in Mr. Hopkins. I'm telling you that I see trouble ahead. And it is coming soon."

Ralph Fairbanks felt deeply regarding the situation which had arisen in Rockton. When he walked down past the railroad shops a little later on his way home and looked in at the open windows, he could not fail to notice that the shopmen were talking together in groups instead of being busy at their various jobs.

"Looks bad," muttered Ralph. "I hated to knock the new super. Especially when he has got such a pretty daughter," and he smiled reminiscently.

Suddenly he started and then quickened his steps. Ahead of him he saw a trimly dressed

figure crossing the railroad at Hammerby Street. He could not mistake the girl. Not when she had been in his mind the previous instant.

Miss Cherry Hopkins was a pronounced blonde. It was at the time when bobbed hair was popular, and bobbed hair added to Cherry's chic appearance. She was slim, and of good figure. She wore a silk sweater, a sport skirt, and a hat that was in keeping.

The girl crossed the tracks and reached the sidewalk on the other side. There were no dwellings near; only warehouses. And save for a group of roughly dressed men loitering behind the flagman's shanty, there were few people near the crossing.

Suddenly Ralph saw something that caused him to dart forward, shouting angrily:

"Look out, Miss Cherry! Look out!"

The girl flashed a look behind her. Fortunately she dodged involuntarily at Ralph Fairbanks' cry, for the next instant a missile flew over her shoulder and crashed against the end of the warehouse. Had it struck the girl it would have hurt her seriously.

CHAPTER II

DISCIPLINE

An over-ripe cabbage may be a dangerous missile. This one exploded almost like a bomb against the warehouse, spattering Cherry Hopkins all over. She screamed and ran back toward Ralph Fairbanks. A harsh voice shouted:

"Poor shot! Yer oughter smashed that Hopkins gal, Whitey."

Ralph saw that the group of fellows behind the flagman's shack had scattered. One long-legged fellow was ahead and evidently in some fear of apprehension.

"You wait right here, Miss Cherry!" the young dispatcher cried. "I'm going to try to get that fellow."

He dashed along the tracks and through an alley of which he knew. He hoped to head off the fellow called "Whitey," who he was quite sure had thrown the cabbage.

But when he came out upon North Main Street he could not see any sign of the hoodlum. He looked into several small stores and tenement

house halls, but the fellow had made good his escape.

When he returned by the way of Hammerby Street he saw Cherry Hopkins trying to wipe the decayed vegetable matter off her sweater and skirt. Her pretty hat was likewise stained. When Ralph came near enough he saw that the girl had been crying.

No man or boy likes to see a girl weep.

Ralph hesitated, not knowing what to say to Cherry Hopkins. He had never been more than casually acquainted with the supervisor's daughter; but he did admire her.

Ralph could not have failed to attract the young girl's attention during the three months she had spent in Rockton. In the first place, almost everybody in the small but thriving city knew the young train dispatcher.

In the first story about Ralph, "Ralph of the Roundhouse," the young fellow's beginnings on the Great Northern were fully related. His father had been one of the builders of the Great Northern, but through unfortunate speculations he had died poor and left Ralph and his mother to struggle along as best they could. In addition, Mr. Fairbanks' partner, Gaspar Farrington, had been dishonest, and had Ralph and his widowed mother at his mercy.

How Ralph checkmated Farrington as well as the exciting incidents of his career in the roundhouse is all narrated in that first volume of the series.

In ensuing volumes the young fellow's career as towerman, fireman, engineer, and in the different grades of dispatcher, is told in full. The sixth volume, "Ralph on the Army Train," is the story of the youth's work in that great part which the railroaders took in the war. By Ralph's individual effort, a heavily loaded train of our boys bound for the embarking port was taken through to safety in spite of a plot to wreck the train.

He was now, some months later, back on his old job as chief dispatcher of this division of the Great Northern. He might have had a good position on the main line; but, in taking it, he would have had to sacrifice some independence and, more than all, must have given up the little home he and his mother owned in Rockton and removed the widow from surroundings that she loved.

"My chance to get a good thing will come again," Ralph had told Mrs. Fairbanks. "And really, I am my own boss here. Even Barton Hopkins can't tell *me* where to get off."

For divisional supervisor Hopkins had soon

become very much disliked. He was a good railroader—no doubt of that. But he should have been a drill-master in a military school rather than the head of a division of a railroad at a time when almost every railroad employee felt that he had been whipsawed between the Government and his employing railroad.

Hopkins lacked tact; he saw nothing but the job and what he could make of it. His god was discipline! He was upright and honest, but, as the saying goes, he bent over backwards when he stood erect. And Ralph Fairbanks was pretty thoroughly convinced that grave trouble was brewing because of Mr. Hopkins' methods.

Just at this moment, however, it was Cherry Hopkins in whose affairs the young dispatcher was deeply interested. As she tried to wipe the stains from her skirt and "sniffled" back her tears, Ralph approached slowly.

"Now, Miss Cherry," he begged, "don't cry about it. If I could have caught that fellow I would have handed him over to one of the road's policemen. It didn't really hurt you——"

"I'm just as mad, Ralph Fairbanks, as I can be!" interrupted the girl, with heat. "And it is always the way wherever we go. The railroad men seem to hate us all."

"Indeed?" rejoined Ralph thoughtfully. "Have you been troubled in Rockton before this?"

"Of course I have. And mother, too. We have been followed on the street, and booed and hissed. Father doesn't mind——"

"I am quite sure he has not reported it to the chief detective of the road, Mr. Bob Adair."

"Father would not report such a thing. He considers it beneath notice."

"I'll say that cabbage was not beneath notice!" cried Ralph. "If it had hit you—well! Come along, Miss Cherry. Let me see you home."

"Oh, I don't want to trouble you, Mr. Fairbanks."

"You know I live in your direction," said Ralph, pleasantly. "We'll walk along together. And you tell me, Miss Cherry, who these fellows are who have insulted your mother and you."

"Oh, dear me, how do I know who they are?" cried the girl, despairingly. "They are low fellows, of course. And many of them are just boys—loafers. They do not even work for the Great Northern."

"But their fathers and brothers do, I suppose?" ruminated Ralph.

"I suppose so. You see, we have to cross the

railroad to do our shopping. When we come into this district, if there is a group of idlers hanging around they are almost sure to call after us. It is not pleasant."

"It should be reported. But, of course, it is your father's business," said Ralph thoughtfully. "I might speak to Mr. Adair. He is a friend of mine. But unless Mr. Hopkins sanctioned any move against the rowdies, I am afraid——"

"I wish you would come in and talk to father about it," Cherry cried eagerly. "He might listen to *you.*"

"Is he at home at this hour?" asked the young dispatcher doubtfully. "I don't know about saying anything to him regarding a private matter."

"I want him to know how you drove those fellows away," she said. "Do come in. You know my father, don't you?"

"Slightly. We do not come in contact much," Ralph said slowly.

"You will like him, Mr. Fairbanks," said the girl earnestly. "He is really a wonderful man. Wherever he has held a position the company has been glad of his services. He is marvelously efficient. And he is forever planning improvements and scheming out ways of saving

money for the road. Oh, yes, they all admire him."

"The men, too?" Ralph asked shrewdly.

"Oh! The laborers? I don't know about that."

"Quite an important point, I assure you," said Ralph grimly. "No matter how much money an official saves the road, if he doesn't hold the confidence and liking of the general run of railroad workers, he is distinctly *not* a success."

"Oh! Do you believe that?" she cried.

"I know it. Railroad workers are the most clannish men in the world. If they have worked long for a particular road they are as loyal to that road as though they owned it. And they resent any meddling with the usual routine of affairs. You have got to handle them with gloves. I fancy, Miss Cherry," added Ralph somewhat grimly, "that your father has thrown away his gloves."

They just then came to the Hopkins house. It was one of the best houses in the section of Rockton in which Ralph and his mother lived. It was rather far from the railroad and the railroad tenements; so supervisor Hopkins' employees were not likely to be seen often.

"Come in—do," urged Cherry, opening the gate. "There's father at the library window."

The young dispatcher saw Barton Hopkins looking through the pane. He was a man with a very high forehead, colorless complexion, a high-arched nose upon which were set astride a pair of shell-rimmed eyeglasses, which masked pale blue eyes. One could warm up to a chunk of ice about as readily as one could to Mr. Barton Hopkins.

And yet, Ralph was sure, there was not a thing the matter with the supervisor save that he was not human! He was a machine. His mental powers were not lubricated with either charity or an interest in the personal affairs of his fellow men.

He stared without a semblance of emotion at Ralph Fairbanks as Cherry urged the latter into the library and introduced the young fellow.

"Oh, yes. I know Mr. Fairbanks," said Mr. Hopkins, and looked the visitor over as though he questioned if he might not in some way show Ralph how to be more efficient in his job.

When Cherry explained volubly how she had been attacked by the rowdies at the railroad crossing and Ralph had come to her assistance, Mr. Hopkins rose and shook hands with the

visitor again. But his second handshake was exactly like the first one. Ralph thought of grasping a dead fish!

"There are too many unemployed men hanging about the yards," said the supervisor in his decisive way, after Cherry had excused herself in order to change to a clean dress. "I am about to point that out to our police department. They should either be given a sentence to the farm or be run out of town."

"A good many of those idlers have been employees of the road. Their homes are here. It is not exactly their fault that they have been thrown out of work. And they do not understand why they should be idle."

"What is that to the Great Northern?" demanded the supervisor with some hauteur. "A railroad is a corporation doing business for gain. It is not a charitable organization."

"It should be both," declared Ralph earnestly. He felt that he could oppose this man safely. Hopkins could not touch his department. "The way the Great Northern—and this division particularly—has kept together a loyal bunch of workmen is by caring for those workmen and their families through dull seasons. I understand that a man has been lopped off each section gang of late. In three cases I know that

the man discharged owned, or was paying for, his own little home. They are up against it, for other work is not easily obtained now."

"I have had that brought to my attention before," answered Mr. Hopkins, with a gesture of finality. "I repeat, it does not interest me—or the Great Northern."

"It is going to interest you, I fear," said Ralph warmly.

"I do not understand you, Mr. Fairbanks."

"The men are getting down on you," said the young fellow bluntly. "As you see they insult and threaten Miss Cherry and your wife. There will be some outbreak——"

"Do you think that if I knew that to be true it would influence me in the least?" asked Mr. Hopkins sternly.

"It would better. Your wife and daughter are likely to suffer. Of course, the discharged men will probably not have anything to do with it; but they cannot control their sympathizers. There is talk of a strike. If a strike comes——"

"Suppose you let such matters be handled by your superiors, Mr. Fairbanks," said the supervisor coldly. "It is not in the province of a train dispatcher."

"Quite true," Ralph said, rising abruptly.

Cherry had not come back into the room.

He felt that he really was not welcome here. And he feared he might be tempted to say something even more unwise to the stiff-necked supervisor.

"You will excuse me, Mr. Hopkins. I really think your daughter and wife are in some danger if they go downtown. Pardon me for saying so."

"Thank you," said Barton Hopkins without an ounce of expression in either his voice or his countenance. "Good-day, Mr. Fairbanks."

"Humph!" thought Ralph, as he fumbled for the knob of the front door. "I reckon I know where I get off with Mr. Hopkins. Oh, yes!"

CHAPTER III

A GOOD DEAL TO THINK OF

It was growing dusk as Ralph Fairbanks left the bungalow occupied by the divisional supervisor and his family. The young fellow felt some little disappointment at not seeing Cherry again. He believed that the girl's mother had deliberately kept her from coming back into the library where the dispatcher had been talking with Barton Hopkins.

"Not that I wanted to talk with the super," considered Ralph, as he found his way out of the house and closed the door behind him. "I would much rather have not done so. He's got an eye as cold as ice. I wonder if he wasn't hatching something in his keen brain right then to make our department more efficient," and Ralph chuckled grimly.

"Oh, well, I guess I am out of his line, come to think of it. But he is certainly going to come a cropper before he gets through in Rockton. When the Brotherhoods begin to

take notice of him, the Great Northern will lose its——Hullo! What's this?"

As he came out through the gateway he saw several shadowy figures across the street. The street lamps were not yet lighted in this block and it was just dark enough for those figures Ralph saw to seem uncertain.

Of course, he had no expectation of being followed. He had no quarrel with any branch of the union men. In fact, most of the employees on the division were Ralph Fairbanks' personal friends.

But he looked twice at the shadowy group as he turned toward his mother's cottage. Again he looked back.

"There he goes!" suddenly shouted a voice. "One of Hopkins' tools. Yah! A lickspittle of the super. Yah!"

It is a fact that "sticks and stones can break your bones, but names will never hurt you"; just the same, that old saw does not salve over the sting of unfair vituperations. Ralph was red-hot on the instant.

To be dignified, too, is all very well. But Ralph knew these hoodlums quite well enough to be sure that only one course with them would make the proper impression. He possessed as much brute courage as any healthy young fellow.

And he did not purpose to allow these loafers to blackguard him on the public street.

The dispatcher turned swiftly and started across the street. The several men and boys in the group yelled again. Some missile hurtled through the dusk and fairly fanned Ralph's cheek!

"Who are you rascals?" demanded Ralph angrily. "I'll show you a thing or two!"

He dashed at the group. None of them was very courageous, for the crowd broke and fled before him. Some woman, looking out of the window of a neighboring house, screamed. Ralph caught one fellow and pulled him back, throwing him heavily to the walk.

"I'll find out who *you* are!" declared the young train dispatcher. "What do you mean by interfering with me?"

The other fellows had fled noisily. The street lights suddenly flashed up and Ralph was able to distinguish the features of the man he had captured.

"Whitey Malone! I thought you were in jail," the young dispatcher said in surprise. "The judge gave you long enough there——"

"I got me fine paid," blubbered the fellow.

Ralph smelled liquor on his breath. He knew Whitey Malone as a good deal of a disgrace to

the community. He had never been a real railroad man. He was merely a hanger-on at the shops, sometimes doing odd jobs, or being taken on the shop payroll for a few weeks.

"It is too bad anybody was foolish enough to pay your fine," declared Ralph sternly.

"Oh, I've got good friends in spite of Bart Hopkins and his new rules that turned me out of me job," snarled Whitey.

"And a good friend paid your fine?" remarked Ralph curiously. "Could the friend be Andy McCarrey, for instance?"

"You want to know too much, Fairbanks," said Whitey sullenly.

"I'm a good guesser," rejoined the young dispatcher, dragging the fellow to his feet. "Now, listen to me, Whitey. This time I'll let you go. I won't turn you over to the police as you deserve."

"You wouldn't dare!" cried Whitey.

"You tempt me too far and I'll show you right now what I dare to do. You keep away from Supervisor Hopkins' house."

"Yah! You're one of his tools, you are!" exclaimed Whitey.

"Listen!" commanded Ralph, shaking him.

"Ow! Ow! Ouch!"

"Listen! You keep away from this street!

And further, don't you trouble Mr. Hopkins' wife or daughter. Remember, I've got your number. If you throw another cabbage or annoy the Hopkins' family in any way, you'll go to the farm."

He threw the ill-smelling fellow from him and turned sharply to walk away. Whitey could not resist another word. He yelled:

"Hopkins' tool! You wait a while, Ralph Fairbanks. You'll see what's going to happen." Then he ran off at top speed.

Ralph did not attempt to follow the fellow. To punish the half-drunken Whitey Malone would be as useless as fencing with a windmill. If anything was to be done to avert trouble and put fear of the law into the bad element around the railroad yards and shops, those higher up must feel the weight of authority. Whitey and his ilk were quite irresponsible.

Ralph told his mother the tale at the supper table, relating the entire incident from the moment he had seen Cherry Hopkins attacked by the rowdies.

"Just the same, there is trouble brewing," he added. "It will center about Mr. Bart Hopkins. And yet, I can't blame the G. M. for backing the super up. Mr. Hopkins is a wonderfully able man. But discipline means more to him

than the contentment and happiness of his employees."

"I am sorry if there is going to be more trouble on the road, Ralph," the widow said, with a sigh.

"Oh, it won't affect me any," he said cheerfully. "I have nothing to do with the shopmen or the maintenance of way men."

"I thought you were safely out of trouble when you got in the train dispatchers' department," said Mrs. Fairbanks reflectively. "But just see what happened in war time. Your peril on that army train——"

"Shucks! Nothing like that is likely to happen again, Mother," he interrupted. "I'm a regular stick-in-the-mud now. Youngest chief dispatcher of any division of the Great Northern system. Why! I'm an old man."

"You are just as likely as ever to be tempted to do a reckless thing," she said, but she smiled at him. "An old man! You are just a baby to me, Ralph, after all."

He laughed; but he blushed, too.

"Don't baby me too much, Mother," he said. "The girls don't think I am a baby."

"Indeed?" she asked. "Are there more girls? I don't know but you are in more danger off the road, than on."

"A new one," said Ralph frankly. He and his mother were the very best of friends. "Didn't I tell you the new super has a daughter? And she's a peach! No! I mean she is a Cherry."

"Cherry?"

"Cherry Hopkins. She is the girl I saw home just now."

"Is she as pretty as her name?" asked Mrs. Fairbanks curiously.

"You bet she is! I'd like to have you see her. I don't see how such a cold and severe proposition as Mr. Hopkins ever came by such a daughter."

"So you think well of her, do you?" asked the widow rather wistfully.

"I surely do. But I don't know what she thinks of me. You know how these girls are. They keep everything close. A fellow doesn't have a chance to learn their opinion of him. They treat 'em all alike."

"Quite right," returned the widow. "The reticent girl keeps out of danger."

"Humph! I don't know how much danger she keeps out of," said Ralph. "But believe me, if something is not done pretty soon to appease the shopmen it will not be safe for either Cherry or her mother to walk on the streets."

"Well, my dear boy," begged the widow, "I hope you will keep out of any part in the trouble. You surely cannot help Mr. Hopkins."

"He wouldn't let me help him if I could do so," answered Ralph.

"All the better," his mother said with satisfaction. "If you cannot be drawn into the trouble by either side in the controversy, very well. I shall feel safe, at least."

"I guess I am out of it, for once," admitted her son. "It gives a fellow a lot to think of. I hate to see trouble come to the division. That Andy McCarrey ought to be jailed. But, on the other hand, I feel that Barton Hopkins is quite as much at fault. By gracious! If I were the G. M.——"

At that his mother burst into laughter. "Oh! You are looking forward to what you would do if you were running the Great Northern," she jeered.

"I don't care," cried her son. "I can see as far into a brick wall as the next one. And when I know things are going wrong——"

"You think you could fix them all up, Ralph?"

"I know I could keep things straighter than Hopkins does. Maybe I would not be so popular with the directors and stockholders; but I'd

run this division without having so much friction. You can bet on that, Mother."

"I never bet," she replied soberly, but her eyes dancing.

She enjoyed hearing Ralph become enthusiastic over railroad matters. Having been a railroader's wife and having joined with her husband in all his hopes and intentions, she could appreciate Ralph's enthusiasm.

"Well, if you were betting, I could give you a tip," laughed Ralph at last. "One of two things is going to happen. Either Mr. Hopkins will be transferred to some other sphere of usefulness, or the division is due to suffer the worst strike it has ever had. I am confident of this, Mother—I am confident."

CHAPTER IV

ZEPH FATHERS AN IDEA

UNDER the present arrangement of his duties as chief dispatcher for the division, Ralph Fairbanks seldom took the "graveyard trick," as it is called. Yet occasionally he went downtown and looked in at the office in the late evening.

Especially when he knew that a particular schedule was being put through. Just now the division was handling extra wheat trains, and although he had O.K.'d his assistant's schedule for that night, Ralph somehow felt that he should see if all was going smoothly on this particular evening.

The trouble over Mr. Hopkins and his daughter had perhaps gotten on the young chief dispatcher's nerves—if he really possessed such things. He tried to read an exciting book of travel and adventure after supper while his mother did some darning; but exciting things which had happened in his own career came to Ralph's mind so insistently that he lost the thread of the writer's story.

With several friends, including Mr. Bob Adair, chief of the Great Northern's detective force, Ralph had fought many an enemy of the road to a standstill. There was another person, too, who was sure to turn up in the vicinity of any railroad trouble.

Ralph suddenly started out of his chair.

"There!" he exclaimed, as his mother looked at him wonderingly. "I had forgotten something. Do you know who I thought I saw to-day downtown?"

"I have no idea, Ralph."

"I believe Zeph is in Rockton. I saw a fellow who looked very much like him passing along the street. But it was when I was in conference with the G. M. and I could not hail him. Afterward—being mixed up in Miss Hopkins' trouble, and all—I forgot Zeph."

"Zeph Dallas?" repeated Mrs. Fairbanks. "I would dearly love to see the boy again. He is so unsettled."

"He is a bird on the wing, I guess," said Ralph. "Never know where he will perch next. But while he is in Rockton I think I know where to find him," and he reached his hat down from its peg.

"Will you go downtown to look him up, Ralph?" asked the widow placidly.

"Yes, ma'am. I'd like to see Zeph."

"So would I. Bring him home with you, Ralph. You know we have a spare bed, and Zeph Dallas is just as welcome to it as though he were your brother."

"I don't know," laughed Ralph, going to the door. "Zeph is a born vagabond. Nothing keeps him long in one place but some intrigue in which he can have a part. He says he is preparing himself to wear Bob Adair's shoes."

"Mr. Adair is a very fine man," said Mrs. Fairbanks. "But his calling is hazardous. I should not like to bring up a son to be a detective."

"Zeph never had any bringing up," declared Ralph, as he went out, and the echoes of his mother's last remark, "Poor fellow!" rang in his ears as he started downtown.

Like most railroad terminal towns, Rockton had a poor section, inhabited by railroad laborers and those hanging to their skirts, and also a much better group of dwellings. Ralph passed through the better part of town without, of course, apprehending any trouble.

Nor was he accosted when he crossed the tracks and approached the station, over which the dispatchers' offices were situated. For his

first thought was, after all, of the night's schedule. One cannot have the responsibility that Ralph Fairbanks shouldered without having one's work uppermost in one's mind all of the time.

The two men on duty welcomed their young chief cheerfully. There really was not an employee of the road about the Rockton terminal who had not some reason for liking Ralph. They might not all agree with him on railroad matters; but they had to respect his independence.

"Fellow in here to see you a while back, Chief," said one of the men on duty.

"Who was it?"

"Nobody I ever saw before," was the reply. "Kind of an odd stick." Ralph described his friend, Zeph Dallas, and the operator nodded. "That's the fellow. Can't be any mistake."

"Didn't he say where he could be found?" asked Ralph.

"No, Chief. A close-mouthed duck, if you ask me. He slipped in and slid out again like an eel through a sewer pipe."

Ralph laughed. "Some metaphor, I'll say, Johnny. Well, the sched.'s all right, I guess?"

"Things are going sweet," he was told. "But when they come to double up those wheat trains

next week, how we going to get the new Midnight Flyer into the clear between here and Oxford? That is what is bothering me, Chief."

"If you want to know," admitted Ralph, as he opened the door to depart, "that little thing is bothering me, too."

He was not, however, bothering his mind over railroad affairs when he descended the stairs to the yard. He was thinking of Zeph. That peculiar and vagabondish fellow must be around Rockton for some pertinent design. And it was evident that he wanted to see his old chum, Ralph Fairbanks.

The latter walked down the yard and looked in at the open windows of one of the lighted shops. The night crew was at work on one of the big freight haulers. Like a row of giant elephants a number of other locomotives stood in the gloomy end of the shop. Repairs were away behind schedule. He heard the hoarse voice of McGuire, one of the oldest and most faithful shop foremen, bawling his crew out for their clumsiness.

"It's touch and go, sure enough," considered Ralph. "I wonder just how much power that Andy McCarrey has over the men employed by the Great Northern? Of course, he has no standing with any of the Brotherhoods; but

these roughnecks—Hullo! Who goes there?"

He had passed the shop and had turned toward a small gate in the stockade which he believed would be unlocked. A shadowy figure flashed into a deeper covert of shadow beside one of the tool houses.

"And only one of two classes try to hide around a railroad yard—a crook or a yard detective. Humph!" muttered Ralph.

He walked on toward the gate. But just as he got to the end of the shed he jumped sidewise and dived into the deeper shadow with arms outstretched. He grabbed somebody almost instantly.

"Stand still!" he commanded. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Instantly the struggling person he had seized stood still. He no longer offered to fight for his liberty. Ralph made out that he was tall—taller than himself—roughly dressed, and that he had lost his hat.

Then, as the young dispatcher passed his hand over the mop of hair the fellow wore and his palm traversed the other's face, he marked a big and high-arched nose and high cheekbones. He had a wide mouth.

"By George!" exclaimed Ralph, "I believe you are the fellow I am looking for."

"Just so," chuckled his prisoner.

"Zeph!"

"Same to you, Ralph!"

The two shook hands warmly, and then Zeph picked up his cap and stuck it sideways upon his thatch of hair.

"How's the boy?" asked Zeph, and Ralph knew he was grinning.

"I'll tell you," chuckled Ralph. "I'm gravely disturbed over a friend of mine——"

"Is his name Andy McCarrey?" whispered Zeph, with his lips close to his friend's ear.

"Goodness!" gasped the dispatcher. "What do you mean? I've been troubled about a fellow named Dallas. But what do you know about McCarrey?"

"I know enough to believe it is not best to take his name in vain around these yards," muttered Zeph. "Come on out of here. I'll give it up for to-night. It was you I wanted to talk to, anyway, Ralph."

"I don't understand you at all, Zeph," complained the young dispatcher, as they walked toward the gate in the yard fence.

"Come on over to the Owl Lunch, and I'll give you an earful," said Zeph. "The missus all right?"

"She is fine, and was asking after you.

When you come to town, Zeph, you should come to our house."

"Can't do it. No knowing who or what may be trailing me," declared the vagabond.

"Nonsense!"

"That's the truth. Right now I got the tail end of something that I want to look up. This McCarrey——"

"Is the leader of the men who are trying to engineer the wildcat strike," explained Ralph.

"Uh-huh? He's more than that."

"What do you mean?" Ralph asked curiously.

They stepped into the narrow space in the owl car and climbed on two stools.

"Milk and mince pie," said Zeph.

"What a stomach!" exclaimed Ralph, smiling. "Don't you ever have indigestion?"

"That is what I'm ordering it for. I have to stay awake all night. Can't sleep much with cold milk and 'graveyard pie' fighting for possession of the digestive tract."

"You are as bad as ever," sighed Ralph.

"Worse," admitted Zeph, taking his first bite of the pie. Then, out of the corner of his mouth he mumbled: "Know where I just came from?"

"I have no idea. Haven't heard from you for weeks. You can't write, I suppose?"

"Never write letters. Have to explain 'em afterward, perhaps. Besides, a letter has often traced a man. 'Leave no trace' is my motto."

"Talk sense," urged Ralph.

"Am."

"It doesn't sound like it. Tell me what makes you so mysterious?"

"I am as mysterious as this 'graveyard pie,' ain't I?" suddenly chuckled Zeph Dallas, holding up the wedge of pie to look at it. "Hullo! Here's a splinter," and he picked out the bit of wood. "The beef they ground up for this mince meat must have had a wooden leg. Anyhow, listen."

"Shoot!" exclaimed Ralph anxiously, sipping his coffee. "Where did you come from?"

"Down the road. I was working for a few days with Section Twenty."

"A section gang hand! Believe me, that's some job," said Ralph, in wonder.

"Somebody has been doing some reefing down there, and Mr. Adair put me wise to it. Eh? You don't know what 'reefing' is?"

"No," admitted the dispatcher.

"It's when fellows get a chance to open cases and crates in transit, remove the goods, fill 'em up with rocks and rubbish, and send 'em on to

the consignees. It was a pretty job, too. I didn't find out who did it."

"What? A failure to your account?" laughed Ralph, knowing how Zeph prided himself upon carrying through every little job the chief detective gave him to handle.

"Not a failure yet," mumbled Zeph. " 'Tain't finished."

"Then it brought you back here to Rockton?"

"Nothing like that. There was an accident on our section and we got over-time work last night. We had just got the tracks clear when this new Midnight Flyer came through. Say! who's handling the throttle on that big engine?"

"Old Byron Marks."

"Wow! That antediluvian pill?"

"Seniority does it," said Ralph briefly. "It's the men's own fault if the dead ones get the best runs."

"Well, believe me," muttered Zeph, "if old By Marks heard what I heard last night you couldn't hoist him into the cabin of that locomotive with a derrick."

"What do you mean, Zeph?" and now Ralph Fairbanks was immensely interested in what his peculiar friend had to say.

"I tell you what, Ralph, I've got an idea. It's

my own idea, and it is worth somebody's attention."

"Let us have it," said the dispatcher. "You have always been original, if nothing more, Zeph."

"Many thanks, dear boy! Well, listen! This Andy McCarrey." He stared all about, noting that the man running the lunch wagon had stepped out. "Take note I've heard a deal about that fellow up and down the road."

"You've heard nothing good of him, I warrant," grumbled Ralph.

"According to which side your bread is buttered on," was the reply. "Most of these roughnecks swear by him."

"But not the officials," said Ralph.

"Right-o. Now, last night, as we section men stood beside the tracks down there waiting for the Midnight Flyer to pass, I heard one fellow say: 'Andy McCarrey says "Thumbs up!"' And his mate said right back: 'Ye-as. And suppose Andy says "Thumbs down!" How about it?'

"Now, you know, and I know, Ralph, the old game of 'thumbs up and thumbs down.' And then, in the times of the old Roman gladiators, the populace condemned the fallen gladiator to

death or reprieved him by a turn of the thumb. Get me?"

"I can't say I do wholly," admitted Ralph.

"That Midnight Flyer whizzed by. Those two fellows looked at it and at old man Marks's head sticking out of the cab window—if that's who it was. They were speaking of that new fast train, the crack train of this division. Eh?"

"It would seem so," confessed Ralph, in a worried tone.

"And it is in Andy McCarrey's hands whether that train goes through safely or not," whispered Zeph, his lips close to Ralph's ear again. "That is my idea, my boy. And it is that idea that has brought me to Rockton to-day."

CHAPTER V

ON THE HEELS OF A SHADOW

RALPH reflected upon the hint Zeph had secured from two section men far down the division. The name of Andy McCarrey was one to conjure with among a large part of the maintenance of way men employed by the Great Northern. "Thumbs up" or "Thumbs down" might mean exactly what Zeph suggested.

And the Midnight Flyer—so called, because it left Rockton terminal on the jot of midnight —was causing the divisional officials enough trouble and anxiety in any event. The new train should run on a schedule that called for the finest kind of human attention. The engineer in charge should be as good a man as there was on the division. The two firemen should be highly trained specialists in the handling of a locomotive's fuel and water.

There were but four stops for this flyer between Rockton and Hammerfest—a four-hour run at top speed. The locomotive pulling the

train, and returning the next day with another fast express, was quite equal to the schedule. It was a new eight-driver, and had come out of the Baldwin works keyed up to seventy miles an hour on a level track. Of course, it was not expected that any engineer could hold the Midnight Flyer to that speed for the entire length of the run; but even the concessions made because of the heavy freight traffic over the division at night were not sufficient to make the run an easy one.

Byron Marks, one of the grizzled engineers on the Great Northern list, was in line for the new locomotive and the new run. If the railroads had proper pension lists, the old man should have been weeding his garden and drawing pension money for the rest of his life.

However, he was vigorous, keen-sighted, and a thoroughly active man. He stood well in the Brotherhood and with the officials of the Great Northern. When the choice came for engineer of the swift express, Marks' name headed the list. He stepped into the job.

But Ralph had helped to make over the night schedule, necessary to squeeze in the varnished train. There were stretches of twenty and thirty miles that called for perfect running, and at a mile a minute, for the Midnight Flyer. A stop

signal, even for half a minute, might make the train fall behind. Any little accident was likely to put her off her speed.

As a matter of fact, since Byron Marks had wheeled her out of the Rockton station a week and more before, not once had the Midnight Flyer made Hammerfest on time. There was a connection to be made there with the Boise City & Western that called for the flyer's being on time. If the Great Northern express could not keep to its schedule, the train might as well be taken off altogether.

"After what you say, Zeph," Ralph said soberly, as the two friends came out of the Owl Lunch wagon, "I am afraid there will not be any hoghead envious of By Marks' run."

"You said something," agreed Zeph. "This McCarrey fellow——"

"Sh! Speak easy of him. Don't know who may be listening."

"Just as I thought. He's the Big Noise around here?"

"He is with the men who are anxious to strike. He has no standing with the Brotherhoods, of course. But you know the general feeling among railroaders just now. If the corporations get the dirty end of the stick there are not many employees going to weep about it."

"You said something," repeated Zeph Dallas. "Well, has this man whose name we will not mention really got all the influence that I thought he had?"

"Among the disgruntled, I am afraid he has," admitted Ralph.

"Then he'd better be reckoned up—and watched."

"You might suggest that to Mr. Adair," said Ralph, in a low voice.

"That is what I was thinking of doing. But you see," said the eager Zeph, "I wanted to be sure that I really had something on the man. Even what I heard down the line is mighty little evidence."

"We'll admit that. But taken with what I know——"

Ralph proceeded to give his friend a full account of the incidents of this very day, when Whitey Malone had attacked both the supervisor's daughter and Ralph himself.

"That fellow is egged on by McCarrey. I know that to be a fact. Mac is addressing meetings in Beeman's Hall, and circulating a lot of literature that ought to be suppressed, and getting ready to deal the road a dirty blow through the dissatisfied element. But what can be proved against him?"

"He ought to be run out of the place."

"You are suggesting fighting fire with fire," Ralph rejoined, shaking his head. "But I know what Mr. Adair will say. He will declare for peace at any price until the enemy makes the first move."

"Hey!" muttered Zeph in Ralph's ear. "Do you know that fellow?"

They had been walking along the dark street, arm in arm. There were few pedestrians in sight. This was a busy part of the town in daylight, but there was little activity now.

Ralph stared after the long, shadowy figure crossing the cobbled street. There was a pale glow of lamplight just where the stranger stepped upon the curb. For an instant his flaxen hair and red neck were visible.

"By gracious! I believe that is the fellow I told you about," Ralph exclaimed.

"Not Mac——?"

"No! Malone! And I believe he's drunk. He had been drinking this afternoon."

"Where could he get liquor around here?"

"I'm sure I don't know. But I'd say he got it, law or no law."

"So that fellow is a friend of the Big Noise?"

"A tool, anyway, of McCarrey's."

"Wonder where he's going?" ruminated

Zeph. "Drunk or sober, he acts as though he had something on his mind."

"There is another gate in the yard fence in that direction," whispered Ralph.

"Come on!" urged Zeph Dallas. "I've another idea, Ralph."

"Aren't you the little wonder?" chuckled the dispatcher. "What now?"

"A drunken man often tells the truth when a sober man won't. He likewise is not to be trusted with a secret. Alcohol loosens the tongue. Let's get after this Whitey Malone and see if we can't make him tell something about McCarrey and his plans."

"Go to it, boy," said Ralph doubtfully. "I'll stay in the background. Whitey has it in for me."

"Keep in sight just the same," commanded Zeph, taking the lead with promptness.

He darted across the street and was soon close on the heels of the shadowy Malone. Ralph looked searchingly about the block before he ventured to follow the two. It seemed that Malone was quite alone. And he staggered on without looking back. He did not fear being followed.

The young dispatcher allowed Zeph and Malone to get well ahead of him. As long as he

could keep Dallas in sight he was satisfied. The trail led directly past the gateway in the yard fence. They went up into the town, crossing the railroad at Hammerby Street where Ralph had had his adventure with Cherry Hopkins that afternoon.

Beyond the warehouse that stood here was a dark and narrow lane. Under the dim radiance of a single street lamp Ralph saw Zeph turn into this alley. Of course, Whitey Malone must be in advance.

Ralph looked around for some weapon before he ventured into the lane. Drunk as Whitey Malone was, the fellow might have apprehended that he was being followed, and might be prepared for an attack.

"Zeph is as reckless as he can be," thought the young dispatcher. "I've seen him get into some messes before this. Ah! What's this?"

It was a spoke of a wheel lying in the gutter —a tough piece of ash as effective in a strong hand as a policeman's nightstick. Ralph weighted it, spat on his palm to tighten his grip on the club, and then ventured into the dark alley.

He had not gone ten steps when he heard the creak of hinges. A door was being opened somewhere ahead of him. But he came to a

sharp corner in the dark alleyway before he spied the opening. A faint radiance shone into the lane.

Between him and this open door was a dark figure—a stooping figure. He made sure it was Zeph. He heard the latter "hist!" in a low tone. He crept forward.

Somebody stumbled inside the hall to which the open door gave entrance. A harsh voice called:

"That you?"

"Yes, it's me," grumbled another voice, which Ralph recognized as belonging to Malone.

"What are you trying to do—knock the house down?" snarled the first speaker.

"Why don't you have some more light? 'Most broke my shins down here, Ouch!"

"Shut up!" commanded the other person, evidently standing at the head of a flight of stairs. "Come up here."

Zeph had crept forward. Ralph saw the outlines of his figure at the edge of the door-frame. Ralph had to take his tip from Zeph.

"Hey!" exclaimed the fault-finding voice again. "You've left that door open, Malone."

Malone's stumbling footsteps returned down the few treads of the stairs he had already mounted. The lamplight faded. Ralph realized

that the man at the top of the stairs was retreating with the lamp in his hand.

The next moment he realized, too, that Zeph had inaugurated one of his perfectly crazy ventures. Instead of cowering back out of sight as Whitey Malone came to the open door, Zeph huddled close to the opening. When the door began to be pushed into place, the young fellow leaped to his feet, darted forward, and encircled the half-drunken Malone with his arms just below the knees!

"Squawk!" vented the surprised Malone. He crashed down the low, outside steps and landed on the flagstones with sufficient force to drive the breath from his body.

"Grab him, Ralph!" hissed Zeph, springing to his feet again, and seeing his friend at his back. "I'm going up there in his place. If a row starts, call the cops."

The next instant Zeph was inside the building and had softly closed the door.

CHAPTER VI

TOUCH AND GO

WHITEY MALONE was on his face, and before he could raise his head and shriek his objection to the treatment accorded him by Zeph Dallas, Ralph sprang astride him and held him down. As Whitey struggled the young dispatcher grabbed his cap from the ground and thrust it into the fellow's mouth. Then he twisted his hands behind him and held the muffled rascal secure.

Ralph was about to use his own handkerchief to bind Whitey's wrists when he remembered that it was monogrammed and might offer a clue to his identity when the affair was over. Therefore he thrust his hand into the side pocket of his captive's coat.

There was a bandanna there. When Ralph pulled it out of the pocket something else came with it—something white that lay on the flagstone while Ralph lashed Whitey's wrists. When this job was done neatly and to his satis-

faction, the young dispatcher picked up the fallen article and rose to his feet.

Whitey Malone was groaning and struggling. His cap completely muffled his voice. He managed to roll over on his back, but he could not spit out the cap.

Ralph looked scrutinizingly at the thing he had drawn from the man's pocket. It was a soiled envelope, sealed. It was not bulky and there was no address upon it as far as Ralph could see. He thrust it into an inner pocket and then turned toward the door of the house into which Zeph Dallas had so recklessly plunged.

Zeph had instructed his friend to call the police if a row was started upstairs. But Ralph did not want to draw the police into any investigation of this affair. He did not know yet whether this was railroad business or not. And, in any event, he was sure that publicity would do no good.

But he feared for Zeph's safety. The fellow was so reckless! With another glance at the prostrate Whitey, the dispatcher sprang up the steps and opened the unlocked door. There was but a faint glimmer of light in the hall and that from the floor above.

Where was Zeph? Ralph dared not utter a sound. He closed the door behind him carefully and made sure that it was tightly shut. Then

he began to grope about the lower hall of the house.

He had brought the spoke of a wheel with him, and the grip of it gave him confidence. But he did not want to pitch upon his friend by mistake. He found no trace of Zeph, however. He believed the fellow must have ventured immediately up the stairs.

Above, Ralph heard the murmur of voices. He started up the flight, stepping close to the wall so that the stair steps would not squeak. This was an old and ramshackle building and every beam in it cracked when the wind blew.

Clinging to the wall, Ralph finally came so near the head of the flight that he could see across the small hall at the top and into a big room, the door of which was more than ajar. This loft seemed to be poorly furnished and it certainly was poorly lighted.

When the man had come to the top of the stairs with the hand lamp, he had brought the only lamp in the place. Now it stood upon a rickety table near one wall and he and another man were seated beside it.

Surely the second person was not Zeph Dallas! And yet Ralph could not see any sign of Zeph. He stepped up on the landing with great care, and looked into the room. There was ab-

solutely nobody there but the pair at the table.

Suddenly one of these moved his chair—scraped it back harshly. He turned to look at the open door.

"What's the matter with you, Whitey?" he growled out. "Why don't you come up here? Did you get what I sent you for?"

Ralph held his breath and remained perfectly still. He had no thought of answering for Whitey Malone.

But startlingly, though in muffled tone, a gruff voice said just above him: "What's that you want? I dunno wot you sent me for. Where'd you send me?"

The fellow at the table jumped up with an ejaculation more forceful than polite. "That drunken bum! What's he been doing, do you suppose, Grif?"

"You should not have trusted him, Andy," returned the second man. "I told you what he was."

The first speaker strode heavily toward the door. Ralph realized that he was about to be discovered. And he knew something else, too: That was, that his reckless friend, Zeph Dallas, was on the next flight above, and had sought to imitate Whitey Malone's voice.

"Nice mess I'm in," thought the young train dispatcher.

He crouched, but gripping the spoke, his only weapon. If it came to a fight, he purposed to have the best of the argument—and have it quick. He was sure he knew who this fellow approaching the door was. The other man did not have to repeat his name.

"Whitey! what the dickens is the matter with you?" called the man. "You know what I sent you for. Didn't you see Perrin?"

Ralph started. Perrin was a name he knew well. Jim Perrin was an officer of the shopmen's union. The union had an agreement with the Great Northern which ran well into the next year. That was one reason why the better element of union labor on the road would not discuss a strike at this time.

But, to Ralph's mind, Jim Perrin was a sly and unfaithful fellow. He had a bad reputation in the neighborhood where he lived. He drank and gambled and had other habits that were inexcusable.

If there was a secret association between Jim Perrin and these men—especially with this fellow approaching the door——

Ralph was thinking of this; but involuntarily

his arm went up—the arm, the hand of which gripped the spoke of the wheel. He poised the club. And just then, as the man's head was thrust out of the doorway like a turtle's out of its shell, that crazy Zeph yelled from above:

"Hit him, boy! Hit him!"

It startled Ralph so that he made a fumble of it. While he hesitated the man drew back his head with a cry of rage, and the next moment he produced a pistol and thrust it into the hall!

He could not have aimed at either of the young fellows; but both of them were startled. It was touch and go—the bullet might find its billet in either of their bodies if the man fired.

"Who's there?" he yelled.

Ralph sprang half way down the stairs. He heard Zeph going up the other flight on the jump. The man yelled again for his comrade to aid him in the chase.

Before Ralph reached the lower door he heard a window smashed above and knew that Zeph Dallas had found a fire escape. He tore open the outer door of the house and bounded through. The faint lamplight from above must have revealed his figure, for Zeph shouted:

"Out of the way, below! Stand aside!"

He had come down the fire escape ladder on the run. There was no ladder to the ground, of

course, and he swung from the lower platform to drop.

Ralph, hearing the men coming down the lower flight of stairs, turned and banged to the outer door and held it. The men tried to turn the knob, but the young train dispatcher had a grip of iron.

"All right, boy!" shrilled Zeph, as he dropped. "Where's that chap I overturned?"

"He's thrashing on his back there," said Ralph coolly. "Let him alone. Be ready to run."

"That's the thing I'm most ready for," admitted Zeph. "Come on!"

Ralph leaped away from the door and followed his friend up the alley. They were a block away in two minutes, and were not followed. Ralph overtook Zeph and dragged him down to a walk.

"Gee!" exclaimed Dallas, "that was a close call——"

"And a silly one," declared the train dispatcher. "Another of the times when you jumped without looking. You had no business in that house."

"Yes, I had. Wasn't that Andy McCarrey?"

"It was."

"Well, I'll know him again then. I never saw him before."

"If that is all you wanted," said Ralph with some scorn, "I could have pointed him out to you a dozen times a day. He doesn't hide himself."

"Huh! He was hiding away to-night, I guess."

"Perhaps. But it did you no good to let him know that his actions were observed and his private messenger followed."

"Oh! You mean that Whitey?"

"That is whom I mean."

"I bet he had something on him we ought to have got hold of," said Zeph, with sudden excitement. "Did you hear what McCarrey said? And was that Jim Perrin he meant, do you suppose?"

"Like enough," said Ralph soberly. "I am afraid Jim is into this strike scheme with both feet."

"The union ought to bounce him."

"He has a lot of friends. But perhaps if it could be proved that he had a secret agreement, or understanding, with McCarrey——"

"Wish we'd searched that Whitey," growled out Zeph, shaking his head mournfully.

"If you didn't always jump into a thing without first looking!" exclaimed Ralph. "Well, where are you stopping?"

"I've got a room on Pearl Street. You know the place? But I didn't think of sleeping tonight."

"And you won't, after that milk and mince pie and the acrobatic activities you have just indulged in," said Ralph, chuckling. "I'll go over to the room with you. We can talk there. I've got something to show you."

"Huh?" questioned Zeph, curiously.

In five minutes they reached the poorly furnished rooming-house in which Zeph was usually sheltered when he came to Rockton. It seemed as though he had a horror of living in good quarters, or as ordinarily respectable people lived.

"You surely are foolish, Zeph," declared Ralph. "There's a good bed and room at your disposal at our house. Mother was only speaking of it this evening. And yet you prefer a ranch like this."

"As I told you, I never know what sort of a mess I may be getting into. Don't want to make your mother trouble. Couldn't think of doing more than coming to Sunday dinner and eating chicken."

"That's a promise," agreed Ralph, smiling. "I'll order a pair of chickens from the butcher in the morning."

"Now, what's the big idea?" asked Zeph, softly, closing his room door after having pulled the electric light chain to illuminate the place.

Ralph looked at him grimly. "Yes," he said, "Whitey had been on an errand for McCarrey, and probably to Jim Perrin's house. He was bringing some message, or the like, from Jim."

"You're guessing," said Zeph. "We ought to have searched Whitey, as I said."

Ralph drew out the sealed envelope that he had taken from Whitey Malone's pocket with his bandanna. He held it out to Zeph.

"I guess this is what Whitey carried," he said quietly.

"Gee, you did search him!" exclaimed the other happily. "You smart kid!"

"The luck of fools," rejoined Ralph, with some disdain. "If it is anything of importance I can't accept praise any more than you can."

But Zeph was already tearing open the envelope.

CHAPTER VII

SOMETHING BAD

RALPH FAIRBANKS sat down on the edge of the narrow bed and watched Zeph open the envelope. He had all the curiosity that his friend had about the contents of it, but he displayed more placidity. Zeph was always as eager as a bird dog on the scent.

"What do you suppose this is?" he murmured, drawing out a folded piece of paper.

"A doctor's prescription?" suggested Ralph grimly.

Zeph gave a look, then uttered a disappointed ejaculation.

"Shucks! Why, it's only a list of names. Not another thing. Four names. Shucks!"

Ralph held out his hand for the paper and Zeph gave it up, his face screwed into an expression of disappointment.

"It's a roast for us," he muttered.

But Ralph made no comment—at first. He read aloud the column of names.

"Lyons,
Bertholdt,
Mike Ranny,
Peters."

"Do you know 'em?" asked Zeph, with some curiosity.

"Perhaps. I know Mike Ranny. He has a brother Bob. Bob takes out Number Eighty-two. He is a good engineer. But Mike is a shopman. Yes, I guess I can identify *him.*"

"And those others?" asked Zeph.

"Perhaps. But that isn't the first thing to do. Here is a list of names that Whitey was carrying to Andy McCarrey. Very secret about it. And we are led to believe the list was coming from Jim Perrin."

"All right! All right!" returned Zeph impatiently. "What's the answer?"

"I can find out if Perrin really wrote these names down. I'll do so to-morrow first thing. Then we may identify the four persons named. Just why Lyons, Bertholdt, Peters and Mike Ranny are named here to Andy McCarrey, we can only surmise. But we may believe that the four men belong to the shopmen's union and Perrin has selected them for some certain matter which McCarrey wishes put over."

Zeph merely nodded his head and humped

his shoulders forward, staring in Ralph's face.

"But remember, we are only supposing these things. Got to identify the writing of the names and the men owning them," the young dispatcher continued.

"Huh!" exclaimed Zeph. "And even then we won't know anything. Got to wait till something happens. Gee!"

"You come to me to-morrow noon and I'll know something," said Ralph, rising and putting away the paper in his wallet. "And then, I think, we'd better get in touch with Mr. Adair."

"I'd like to have something to show him," murmured Zeph. "Something good."

"You are more likely to have something bad to show him," returned Ralph seriously. "I believe, Zeph, that this Andy McCarrey, with Jim Perrin to help him, could swing more than half of the shopmen in Rockton."

"It's a queer proposition. How does it come this McCarrey butts in here? And him not a union man, nor even an employee of the Great Northern?"

"I give it to you straight, Zeph," sighed Ralph, buttoning his coat over the wallet. "I believe McCarrey followed the new supervisor here."

"What!"

"No 'what' about it. Mr. Hopkins—the G. M. admitted it to me—got into trouble on an eastern railroad. This McCarrey had a run-in with Barton Hopkins there. As soon as Mr. Hopkins took hold here at Rockton as supervisor of the division, McCarrey appeared."

"And then the trouble started?" demanded Zeph.

"You said it. It looks like a personal fight, more than anything else, between McCarrey and the super."

"But why do our men lend themselves so easily to the leadership of an outsider like McCarrey?"

"He's got their number, I guess," grumbled Ralph. "He knows how Mr. Hopkins starts friction with the men. 'Discipline!' Humph!"

"He's a regular red flannel shirt, is he?" grumbled Zeph Dallas. "I heard he had everybody scratching. Has he jumped you yet, Ralph?"

"Not much. And I don't suppose he'll try to. We get our orders from Mr. Glidden at main headquarters."

"Well," remarked Zeph wisely, "I never saw one of these wiseacres who try to tell everybody their business, who didn't butt in more or less on things that didn't concern 'em. But, of

course, Mr. Hopkins can talk turkey to the men in all other branches of the service on this division."

"He can and does. And he has got the men so sore that they are willing to be led by anybody who promises to help them get square with the super. McCarrey needs only to sit back and wait, and things will come his way."

"That club you had just now ought to have come his way," sighed Zeph. "Going? Well, good-night, Ralph."

"Good-night. Better go to bed—if the mince pie and milk will let you sleep. And don't fail to show up at the offices to-morrow noon."

Ralph went home in a very serious frame of mind. His mother was serious, too, the next morning, when she found the coat he had worn the evening before had a great rent in it and two buttons torn off.

"I never knew it to fail, Ralph," she said, rather sharply for her, "that when Zeph Dallas comes around you get into trouble. You have been in a fight. Look at that scratch on your cheek. What did you do last night?"

"You are a wonderfully close observer, Mother," said Ralph, laughing. "How is it you always see so much?"

"Indeed?" and she smiled ruefully at him.

"Why shouldn't I observe every little thing about my son? At least, until some other woman has a better right to him."

"Goodness me!" complained Ralph, with twinkling eyes. "You talk as though I was in danger of being kidnapped."

"How do I know? There was the young lady you were talking of at supper."

"And I believe she and her family are going to be in more trouble before it is all said and done," muttered Ralph.

But he got out of explaining in detail about his adventure with Zeph Dallas the previous evening. He knew, however, his mother was merely in fun about Cherry Hopkins. Secretly, whenever Ralph thought of the pretty blonde girl, he felt anxiety for her safety. Such rascals as Whitey Malone and the other fellows who would do Andy McCarrey's bidding might really do Cherry serious harm.

He went to the dispatchers' offices early, saw that the day-trick men were getting on all right, and then went in search of a timekeeper who, he knew, was to be trusted. This gray-haired employee of the Great Northern was one of those loyal men who considered any blow at the road a blow at their own livelihood and future prospects.

"Think you could recognize Jim Perrin's writing wherever you saw it, John?" the young chief dispatcher asked.

"Jim Perrin, is it? A bad egg. It is too bad he leads so many around by the nose. I know his handwriting well. I ought to. He has been signing for his pay check for ten years here."

"Look at this," said Ralph, thrusting the list of four names in front of the timekeeper. "What do you think?"

The man studied the names through his spectacles. Then he nodded.

"I know them, too," he said. "They are all in the shops here. Billy Lyons, Abe Bertholdt, Micky Ranny, brother of Bob, the hoghead, and Sam Peters. Yes, I know 'em all."

"That is not just what I asked you," Ralph explained. "Who do you think wrote those names on that paper?"

"Oh! Oh!" cried the timekeeper. "That's the idea, is it?" He squinted at the four brief lines of writing. "Who wrote 'em down for you, is it? What is this, Mr. Fairbanks? One of the new super's efficiency tricks, I dunno?"

"Now, John!" exclaimed Ralph, laughing, "do you think I would lend myself to any of *his* nonsense?"

He turned around while the timekeeper was chuckling and saw Mr. Barton Hopkins standing behind them in the doorway of the little office. The supervisor stared at the young train dispatcher with a very grim visage indeed. Without doubt he had heard enough to understand the meaning of Ralph's reply to the timekeeper.

When the supervisor had turned on his heel and disappeared, Ralph said to the timekeeper, with no shadow of change in his voice:

"Well? How about it?"

The man fumbled the leaves of a ledger and finally compared the writing on the sheet of paper with something in the ledger. He beckoned Ralph closer.

"Look there, now, Mr. Fairbanks. D'you see where he has signed for his check last week? And I could show you a hundred other signatures. There's the P in Peters and the same letter in Perrin. They're like two peas in a pod, ain't they, now?"

"I believe you!"

"The little r's in Perrin are like the little r in Bertholdt and in Peters. D'you see?"

"I see."

"That's your answer. Jim Perrin wrote

them four names with his own fist. I'd swear to it."

"Thank you, John," Ralph replied soberly. "I may have more to say to you about this later. Keep it to yourself."

"Sure, sir, I've the tight lip on me," said the timekeeper.

Ralph wished, as he went back to his office, that he had had "the tight lip" as well. He had allowed his tongue to get him in bad with Mr. Barton Hopkins. The supervisor was the kind of man that would not easily forget a slight.

"He'll easily forget that I saved his daughter from that gang yesterday," thought Ralph. "But he will remember that I spoke slightingly of him to another employee.

"I told Zeph something bad was likely to be the word he sent Mr. Adair. Guess the 'something bad' may be connected with my peace of mind. I'm going to be on the lookout from now on for Mr. Barton Hopkins to get his gaff into me."

It came sooner than Ralph really expected.

CHAPTER VIII

A CLASH OF AUTHORITY

WHEN Zeph Dallas showed himself in Ralph's office about noon the latter had several points which he could lay before the enthusiastic amateur sleuth.

"But you musn't go it alone any longer, Zeph," the young train dispatcher said. "There's something going to break soon, and Mr. Adair will want to know all you get wise to, and as fast as you discover it. What do you suppose he sends you roosters out along the line for, your health?"

Zeph grinned. "I know he is combing every division for information regarding a possible strike. The Great Northern doesn't want to bring in a private detective agency with their guards if it can be helped. I know."

"All right—you know so much! Listen to this," and Ralph told him of his discovery through the aid of the old timekeeper. "And now here is this man who was with Andy McCarrey last night."

"Who's that? Whitey Malone? I just saw him, sobered up, but with two beautiful black eyes."

"We never gave him those," declared Ralph. "I bet McCarrey pitched into him for losing the list Perrin sent by him. Well, that other man I heard McCarrey call 'Grif' must be Griffin Falk, and he acts as McCarrey's secretary, or right-hand man. Mac is no literary character. He can talk, but the words have to be put into his mouth. They say Grif writes his speeches and handles all his correspondence."

"Then we know quite some to tell Mr. Bob Adair," said Zeph, with satisfaction.

"You are right we do. Here is this list. I have written beside Perrin's writing the full names of the four men and what they do in the shops and how they stand in the union. They will have to be watched from now on. Well, it is nothing in my young life. I am going to tend to my knitting and keep out of any trouble, that's all."

Zeph fairly giggled. "I hear you," he said. "But you won't be able to sit up in this conning tower of yours and calmly watch a ruction down below without getting into it, and getting in with both feet."

"No, no! Nothing like that," declared Ralph,

smiling and shaking his head as his friend departed.

The young train dispatcher really meant what he said. He hated to see things going wrong for the division—for the whole Great Northern system, in fact. But he had his job, and his place in the railroad system, and he did not mean to step aside.

He considered himself quite invulnerable where he sat. He was independent of everybody save his good friend, Glidden, at main headquarters. As long as he managed to drive through his schedules with some kind of regularity, Ralph felt that nobody could actually hurt him with the company.

But not long after luncheon one of the call-boys came to the door of his little private office and said:

"Mist' Hopkins wants you, Mist' Fairbanks. Just told me. Right now."

"Wants me?" queried Ralph, in more surprise than apprehension. "The super?"

"Yep. Bet you he's got some new way for you to run the trains. Two on the same track, mebbe, to save wear on the iron," and the saucy youngster went away, chuckling.

That is the way the entire force was consider-

ing the supervisor. Not even the callboys had proper respect for the bothersome official.

Ralph hesitated a little before responding to the request of Mr. Hopkins. Hopkins had absolutely no authority over the train dispatcher's department. In fact, the divisional officers took orders, to a degree, from the train dispatchers. For that department "lapped over" onto the main and other divisions of the Great Northern. Ralph had to handle trains to and from the other divisions of the system.

So he hesitated about answering the call to Mr. Hopkins' office. Any other man in Hopkins' place would have come to Ralph's room and said his little say, whatever it was. The day when a supervisor could call a train dispatcher to account was long since past in railroading.

Ralph looked over what was being done in his outer office before descending the flight to the supervisor's room. It was at the busiest time of the day and the young chief dispatcher kept his eye constantly on what was going on during every afternoon. He had his best men on duty at night.

Hopkins was drumming impatiently on his desk with a pencil when Ralph entered. The

latter secretly wished to tell him that that drumming was "waste energy." But the supervisor's face did not encourage any expression of humor.

"I have been waiting for you, Mr. Fairbanks," he said sharply.

Ralph wanted to tell him the nearest way to get to his office, but he bit it back, and waited.

"I want to put a proposition before you," said the supervisor. "I have turned my thought considerably to the train dispatching on this division. It might be greatly improved."

At that Ralph straightened up and his lips became a grim line.

"I can refer you to Mr. Glidden at main headquarters," he said bluntly. "He will undoubtedly be glad to take up any matter of the kind with you. I have no jurisdiction."

"Yes, yes! I understand all that," said the supervisor, with a wave of his hand. "But you know I have practically a free hand here——"

"I have not been so informed. I still take all my orders from Mr. Glidden," and Ralph spoke doggedly.

"Listen, young man! You are in no position to war with me. In my opinion you are quite too young for your responsible position, anyway."

"That can be taken up with the general manager if you choose," said Ralph, with a sigh, turning away. "He gave me the job."

"Wait!" exclaimed Hopkins coldly. "You are a very smart young man; but you do not know everything—not even about your job."

"I admit the truth of your last statement, anyway," said Ralph, grinning slightly. "In my line there is always something to learn."

"Listen to me, then. I can tell you something."

"Very well, Mr. Hopkins," said Ralph. "If you really have something of importance to say, I am here to listen."

Ralph was not soothing in his speech. But he had heretofore been obliged to assert himself over older men in some authority in order to hold his position. Supervisor Hopkins was intruding, and Ralph felt that the matter had to be stopped right here and now.

"You understand, Fairbanks," said the supervisor, "that I have not called you down here for any picayune matter."

"I don't know what you called me away from my duties for," said Ralph brusquely. "It must be important. I am listening."

"I do not attempt to order you to do anything."

"You seem to expect me to obey your call in the very busiest part of the day."

"That is along the line of which I wish to speak," said Hopkins composedly. "I think you should be much more closely connected with your work in the daytime. You have three men in your office between seven in the morning and seven at night. Now, if you handled the early short watch and the late short watch yourself——"

"You mean the dog-watches?" demanded Ralph, in surprise.

"Yes. I mean that you could easily arrange your hours so that you could handle the train traffic between seven and nine a. m. and five and seven p. m. I mean——"

"What's this?" demanded Ralph, not only in astonishment, but with anger. "You want me to come down as early as seven and go away as late as seven at night? What sort of hours are those?"

"Remember, I am only suggesting," said Hopkins coldly. "I take it that you have the interest of the Great Northern at heart."

"And a little of the interest of Ralph Fairbanks at heart," returned the young fellow angrily. "Why, what chance would I have for any freedom? I come down at nine now and go

away at five. Why should I go back to the key during the dog watches?"

"If you will do so I can show you how you may get rid of one operator."

"I don't wish to get rid of one operator. I ought really to have another. Let me remind you, Mr. Hopkins, the strain on a train dispatcher and his assistants, especially under the schedules we have to make on this division just now, is something fierce! You don't know what you are talking about, Mr. Hopkins."

"I know exactly what I am talking about, young man," said the supervisor grimly, and those eyeglasses of his seemed fairly to sparkle. "I am pointing out to you a way in which you can save the road one man's salary——"

"Tell that to the stockholders—don't tell it to me!" cried Ralph angrily. "If I can find some way of making them see at headquarters that I need another man, I am going to do so. I know what is needed in my department. You don't. Keep your hands off!"

Hopkins spoke again before the train dispatcher reached the door.

"You would better consider my offer of advice, Fairbanks," and his voice was like ice. "I give you a chance, first."

"To whom will you give the second chance?" demanded Ralph, looking back at him.

"I shall place my advice before the proper authorities. They have hired me to make this division efficient in every way. I do not like to go over your head——"

"Don't let that bother you," answered Ralph. "I shall not hold it against you, Mr. Hopkins, if you manage to take your ideas before a special meeting of the board. Nobody save John Glidden is going to give me my orders. You may as well understand that right now. Good-day!"

He swung out of the room, closing the door with an emphatic bang. He felt a decided warmth of satisfaction because of this throwing of his glove at Mr. Hopkins' feet. Yet he thought, too:

"Well, that does settle me with Miss Cherry. I am persona non grata there for the rest of the chapter. Humph! What cheek—what cold, brass, gall—that man has!"

CHAPTER IX

IT HAPPENS AGAIN

As soon as he got back to the train dispatchers' department Ralph put in a call for main headquarters and Mr. John Glidden. After a time the switchboard operator called him and Ralph went into the booth.

"How do the schedules go, Ralph?" asked Mr. Glidden, after briefly greeting his young friend. "I hear you are having trouble."

"Trouble enough. That Midnight Flyer is the worst thing on our hands just now, however."

"Number Two-o-two?"

"Yes, sir. Two hundred and two. Believe me! It's like crowding a fat man through a Pullman ventilator."

"Well, what else is the trouble?"

"As I have told you a dozen times, Mr. Glidden, we are short-handed."

"I know! I know, boy! But this system is having an economical streak and I am afraid I cannot squeeze you through another assistant, Ralph. Not just now."

"It better be now, or it will be too late," declared Ralph. "This efficiency expert that is running things at this terminal is going to get to the board and show 'em that I can run this office with a cripple and a fifteen year old boy, I shouldn't wonder."

"You mean the super?" exclaimed Mr. Glidden.

"I see you are a good guesser."

"Barton Hopkins is the limit!" exclaimed the chief dispatcher of the Great Northern. "I had no idea he would have the impudence to interfere in our affairs."

"I'm telling you. He has just now told me how I can work two shifts a day myself and so save one man's salary."

"Don't pay the least attention to him, Ralph!" said Mr. Glidden earnestly.

"Just the same I have an idea that you are going to hear from him. And he'll go higher up. He is as persistent as a red ant."

"And just about as useful," growled out Glidden over the wire. "And I never did see that ants were of much use in spite of all the philosophers. They are just a nuisance when they get into the sugar."

This made Ralph laugh, and when he hung up the telephone receiver he felt better. He

knew he had a friend at headquarters who would do his best to look out for his interests.

That afternoon, however, he had the sample of Mr. Hopkins' dislike for him that he had expected. When he left the railroad building and walked down South Main Street to do an errand for his mother, he saw a little electric runabout take the crossing at Hammerby Street and turn toward one of the big department stores. He knew the car at a glance, for he had seen Cherry Hopkins and her mother driving it many times.

The women entered the store and Ralph went on about his business. Half an hour later he was returning when he spied several young men walking ahead of him toward the department store into which Mrs. Hopkins and Cherry had disappeared. One of these fellows the train dispatcher identified as Whitey Malone.

As the gang lurched along the sidewalk, taking up more than their share of the way, Ralph fell to a slower pace and watched them. Opposite the Hopkins car the gang halted. Whitey stooped and seemed to be examining the wheels on that side. Ralph quickened his pace, for he had a feeling that Whitey Malone would do almost any mean trick which might hurt any of the Hopkins family.

In a moment Malone got to his feet and started after his friends. A small boy walking near Ralph began to giggle.

"What's all the joy, kid?" the young dispatcher asked curiously.

"Didn't you see that?" demanded the youngster.

"I didn't see anything, I guess," rejoined the puzzled Ralph.

"That white-headed feller turned a cute trick then. Say, they are all doing it! I seen a car last night—"

At that moment Mrs. Hopkins and Cherry came out of the store. A clerk followed them with bundles. The girl jumped in first and started the motor. In half a minute her mother and the bundles were likewise stowed away and the door of the car slammed.

Ralph had halted. He did not want to pass them again. The boy, giggling still, went along to stand and watch the car. Cherry started and turned it, heading for the Hammerby Street crossing. Ralph noticed that the flagman was just coming out of his shack.

The young dispatcher slipped his watch into his palm and looked at it. Number 43 was about due—was even now wheeling into the mouth of the yard half a mile away. The run-

about would have plenty of time to cross the track.

Then with a sudden intake of breath, the young fellow started. He had seen something—evidently the thing the youngster was laughing his head off about. The tires on the near side of the Hopkins' car were being deflated.

"That scoundrel!" exclaimed Ralph.

He knew instantly what Whitey Malone had done. The fellow had loosened the air valves and gradually, as the weight of the car pressed on the tires, the inflated rubber flattened. Before the car reached the crossing it was bumping on that side, and Ralph saw Cherry slowing down and looking out to see what the matter was.

Unfortunately the girl did not stop immediately. While she was puzzled about the hobbling car, she ran on. She was half way across the tracks—exactly straddling the inbound rails, in fact—when the motor stalled!

The flagman, who was waiting to drop the gates when the supervisor's car got over, immediately lost his head. He screamed and ran toward the car, waving his flag. The thunder of the oncoming train grew rapidly, vibrating on the air. Ralph leaped away after the automobile.

The flagman, seeing the car stop dead, rushed back and dropped the gates! If the girl could have got the runabout started again, she was shut off from escape.

"And right on the inbound rails!" gasped Ralph.

He saw the car could not be moved. He did not even speak to Cherry as he ran. But he grabbed the red flag out of the crossing-man's hand and started up the track, waving it madly.

It was a straight way for several rods. He knew the engineer would soon see him. Yet he almost held his breath until he heard the shriek of the locomotive whistle as it called for "brakes" and knew that the driver had set the compressed air as he called the brakemen to their unexpected duty.

The high front of the big machine plowed toward him, looking as though it could not be stopped at all! Ralph stepped out from between the rails when the pilot was almost upon him. He saw the fireman hanging out of the window on his side of the cabin, staring earnestly ahead. The runabout seemed doomed. And the two occupants of the car had not attempted to get out!

"Great heavens, if she hits it!" murmured the young train dispatcher.

He started on a staggering run back to the

crossing. He was aware that a crowd was gathering, seemingly by magic, on both sides of the crossing. From the south appeared a tall figure that burst through the narrow opening at the end of the gate and started for the endangered automobile.

Fire flew from the brakeshoes of the train and the grind and hiss of the iron threatened flat tires on more than one wheel. Ralph, the breath sobbing in his throat, continued to stumble on over the cinder path.

The tall figure he knew was that of Mr. Barton Hopkins. The supervisor had chanced to come along just in season to see the danger of his wife and daughter.

But Ralph knew well enough that the man—no more than Ralph himself—could do nothing to aid the victims of this threatened disaster.

CHAPTER X

THE NIGHT OF THE STRIKE

THE locomotive stopped—and there was no crash such as Ralph had expected. He was only a few yards behind the high step of the great machine down which the fireman swung himself.

"What's the matter with those boobs?" demanded the latter. "Blocking the road like this —huh! Wait till the super gets wise to it. He's got just what it costs to stop a train figgered out into cents and mills."

Ralph grabbed him by the shoulder and shot into his ear: "Muffle down, Haney! That's the super himself there, and it is his wife and girl in the car."

"Great Glory and Jerusalem!" gasped the fireman. "Thanks, Fairbanks. He'll be as sore as a boil over this. And it's a wonder that we didn't smash the thing to splinters, for our brakes don't work any too well. The old mill ought to be in the shops right now."

The fireman slipped back to warn the engi-

neer. Ralph went on to the crossing. Mrs. Hopkins and Cherry had now got out of the runabout. The girl was actually keeping the woman from falling, the latter was so much overcome. But Cherry flashed Ralph an illuminating look. Her eyes were like stars.

The supervisor knew exactly what to do in the emergency. Already he had ordered the gate raised and had beckoned to some idlers to come and lift the car. He did not take hold himself, but he ordered them what to do. In fact, Ralph helped lift the runabout over the tracks and out onto Hammerby Street.

"That will do, men. Thanks," said Mr. Hopkins coldly. He turned to his daughter. "How did it happen? Your wheels are deflated."

"I don't know. I did not understand what had happened until we were on the crossing, Papa," Cherry replied.

"Somebody must have done it when the car was standing before the store," said Mrs. Hopkins.

"Thank you, Ralph Fairbanks!" whispered Cherry, suddenly seizing the young fellow's hand.

Hopkins wheeled and stared coldly at Ralph. "Just what has Mr. Fairbanks done to be thanked for, Cherry?" the supervisor asked.

"He stopped the train, Papa," declared the girl firmly.

"Humph! The engineer stopped the train, to be exact," said her father and then turned to haul the pump out from under the car seat.

Ralph tipped his hat to the ladies and walked away.

"In my opinion, Barton Hopkins is a pretty small man," the train dispatcher thought. "In any case, I may as well make up my mind to one fact: If he can 'get' me he will. He is as cold-blooded as a snake. And I guess I would better keep away from Miss Cherry, or she will get into trouble.

"Just the same," he concluded, "she's a fine girl. She could not bear to see the little thing I did for them ignored. But, goodness me, how the rank and file of the men hate her father!"

He did not tell his mother this time of the happening. He had learned it was better not to give the widow details of any possible danger that he stepped into. She only worried the more about him when he was out from under her eye.

The newspapers had begun to talk of the wild-cat strike extending to this division of the Great Northern, and Mrs. Fairbanks read enough about it in her favorite evening sheet. Ralph might

have told her a deal more—and much more to the purpose—had he chosen to.

The feeling in the shops was a matter for grave discussion among the officials. The older employees, and the men in the stronger Brotherhoods, thought of and talked of little else. If the shopmen and maintenance of way men went out there was bound to be trouble.

Most railroad systems keep only one jump ahead of disaster in the busy season. Locomotives and all other rolling stock have to be watched and inspected just as closely and carefully as a good family doctor watches his patients. A turn in the shops for the great moguls and eight-wheelers comes more frequently than the public suspects. This averts accidents more surely than block-signal systems or perfect train dispatching.

Of late the shopmen had been lax in their work, just as the section men had been lax in their department. Disgruntled employees of any corporation are dangerous. In the railroad business they are frightfully so.

Every evening when the shifts changed in the shops and yard, groups of men stood around and talked. Sometimes some "soap-box orator" made a speech just outside the railroad property.

The railway police could not disturb these meetings, but they worked with the city police and soon had them stopped.

At once Andy McCarrey and others got up in Beeman Hall and shouted about the wrongs of the workingman and how the police were governed by the corporation.

"Hot air! Hot air!" said John, the old timekeeper, to Ralph. "Just the same, Jim Perrin is doing his dirtiest in the union, too. Mark my word, Mr. Fairbanks; there's something going to break—and soon."

Ralph, however, went on the even tenor of his way and fully believed that whatever happened, it would not affect him. He would have liked to see Zeph Dallas again or hear from Bob Adair.

But Zeph had disappeared right after Ralph's last interview with him and, day or night, the train dispatcher had seen no sign of the fellow. He was so troubled over the night schedules, however, that every evening he went downtown again after supper.

"I never knew you to be so particular about your dispatching, Ralph," his mother complained. "Do you really expect trouble?"

"I'll tell you, Mother," he said, trying to smile. "When we have to crowd the trains so close I naturally feel anxiety. I've got good men on the

job. But some night I expect that Midnight Flyer or some other important train to stall and ball up the entire schedule.

"These wheat trains clutter up the east-bound tracks all night long. We have had two break-downs within forty-eight hours this week. The yard was not cleared of west-bound freight this morning until nine o'clock. We're in a mess!"

"But they cannot hold you responsible for any of the trouble," his mother declared loyally.

"I don't know. The way the super looks at me when we meet—— Humph! But of course, Mother, I feel responsibility. I want the trains to get in and out on time. The reports going back to main headquarters aren't encouraging. Although Mr. Glidden is mighty nice about it."

"He would be," declared Mrs. Fairbanks. "He understands."

Just the same, her confidence did not greatly encourage Ralph. The day schedule did not much trouble him, but at night it grew worse and worse. As he had feared, with the increased number of wheat trains trying to get through, there being a big movement of grain to Europe at this time, most other freight was side-tracked. The passenger trains, too, were displaced.

Two mornings in succession the Midnight Flyer got to Hammerfest so late that the Boise

City connection was lost. Passengers had to wait two hours. Yet the train could not be started earlier than midnight from Rockton because the connection from the east could not be made.

"Old Byron Marks is a has-been," the master mechanic said to Ralph on one occasion. "But what can *I* do? It is out of my hands. The old man can't make the time, and he knows it. But he doesn't want to fall down on the run, either. You know what that would mean."

"It would give the super a chance to demand his withdrawal," said Ralph.

"You bet. And Bart Hopkins is only waiting for that. If he had his way, and if it wasn't for the Brotherhoods, he'd scrap every man with gray hair on the division."

"Can't anybody talk with Byron and show him how to get out gracefully?"

"He's as touchy as a hen with a brood of chicks. I'd like to send him back to a switch engine. We need on that Flyer somebody like you, Ralph. Yes, sir, it's a run that calls for young blood!"

But Ralph raised both hands and gestured him away from his desk. "No, no! Tempt me not!" he cried. "Haven't I trouble enough of my own right here and now?"

"But if I have to take Byron off for incompetency, and that certainly will kill the old man, whom shall I put in his place? Every good man is needed. This blamed new eight hour rule—well, it's good in some ways, of course; but it makes us short-handed."

The official went away grumbling. He, too, had his troubles. He had to take his orders from the supervisor and some of them were not to his taste.

It is said that only the weight of the last straw broke the camel's back. It needed some particular event to start the conflagration that promised to overwhelm the division, if not the whole Great Northern system. It was as small a thing as the idea of the change in the style of the men's working caps that Ralph had put before the general manager some weeks before.

A new order was pasted on the shop board one evening—an order promulgated by the supervisor and from his office. It was a notice to the effect that the call boys, or others, were not to be sent out to the lunch places near the shops to purchase lunches for the men who wanted them, save in the men's own time.

That meant that nobody could send for anything to eat and drink until the whistle blew for recess. As the lunch places and delicatessen

stores were sure to be crowded at those particular hours, either all the workmen would have to bring cans, or those that did not must wait half or three-quarters of an hour before they ate.

The boys who did these errands for the shopmen were paid so meagerly that their time cost the company but little. It was certainly a picayune piece of business. But probably Mr. Hopkins had figured it out to his own satisfaction that several dollars a year might be saved to the Great Northern.

Somebody read the inconspicuous notice on the board soon after the night crew started working in the shops. Ralph chanced to be in the train dispatchers' offices when he heard the roar of the machinery in the nearest shop subside and finally cease entirely. He went to the window and looked out.

"What's happened, Chief?" asked his assistant, sitting at the telegraph instrument.

"I can't make it out. Why! there goes Benson, the stationary engineer. He's shut down the power! Why, Johnny, they are crowding out of the shop!"

"Strike!" ejaculated the operator, and opened his key.

"Wait! Let me be sure," cried Ralph, and

darted to the door and down the stairs to the yard.

It was only a few rods to the first shop. He saw the men, angry and blusterous, crowding out of the doors like disturbed ants. He found one coherent man whom he knew, and got the story of the supervisor's latest order.

"Hold on! What are you fellows going to do?" Ralph demanded of this man.

"We're going to hold a meeting. Beeman's Hall. We'll stand no more of this blamed foolishness. Anyhow, we won't stand for that cut in wages they say is coming. I tell you, Fairbanks, the whole road is going to the dogs."

"And you propose to help it go there, do you?" Ralph demanded.

But he knew it was useless to argue the matter. The men were red hot. They were discarding the advice and the orders of their own union officials. Andy McCarrey was about to see his cherished plans come to fruition.

CHAPTER XI

MORE FRICTION

RALPH FAIRBANKS disliked to do it. But it seemed that he was the first responsible person about the railroad building to mark the beginning of the wildcat strike of the shopmen. Somebody had to tell Barton Hopkins, and it seemed the duty devolved upon him.

"The old man will be mighty sore," said Johnny, the operator. "I'd better shoot the news to main headquarters, hadn't I?"

"Yes," replied Ralph, going into the telephone booth.

He asked the operator for Mr. Hopkins' house number. It was not very late in the evening and he knew Mr. Hopkins could not have gone to bed. But it was several minutes during which he heard the indicator buzzing again and again, before he received any answer.

Then it was not the supervisor's sharp voice that said: "Mr. Hopkins' residence. What is wanted?"

"Oh, my gracious, Miss Cherry! Is that you?" asked the young train dispatcher, anxiously.

"Ralph Fairbanks! What has happened?"

In spite of his excitement Ralph noted—and was glad!—that the girl recognized his voice so quickly.

"I am at headquarters, Miss Cherry! Something has happened that your father should know about."

"He has gone out. We expect him back any moment. Tell me what it is, Mr. Fairbanks!"

"The men have struck!"

"What—what made them?"

"Oh, it was coming. It could not be helped," Ralph hastily assured her. "I don't know how far it will spread. Tell your father as soon as you see him, will you, please? I will stay here till he comes. Don't know: Maybe the yardmen will go out. If they do——"

He hung up without finishing his sentence. Through the glass door of the cabinet he had seen one of the call boys rush into the outer office.

"Hey! Where's Fairbanks?" the boy demanded. "Hey, Mist' Fairbanks! Dooley wants you down the yard."

"Dooley? At the switch shanty? What for?"

"The feller driving the kettle has flew the

coop!" answered the excited boy. "They are all striking!"

"Not one of the engineers?" gasped Ralph.

"Aw, that feller's a new one. He wasn't long on the job. Been talking strike ever since he started to work here," explained the call boy, keeping alongside of Ralph as the latter started down the wide stairs. "He is a no-good, take it from me. Dooley's near 'bout crazy. He started to chase the feller back on the kettle with a switchbar, but the man could run too fast. Somebody's got to take the throttle on that kettle or there won't be no more switchin' done in this yard to-night."

"Why haven't you been sent for a substitute?" the train dispatcher asked the voluble youth.

"Ain't one on the list that ain't done his eight-hour shift and four overtime. All but the crews for the regular runs. You wouldn't expect me to go after old By Marks, would you, to drive that yard kettle?"

Ralph laughed shortly. He was very well aware how short the division was of engineers and firemen. The twelve-hour rule, while it was a good thing and a needed improvement, had disorganized the entire Great Northern crew system. The system had never got properly into step with the new idea.

Just why Dooley should have called him, Ralph did not guess at first. Save that he might be the only person in authority about the headquarters at this hour. Dooley never had shown much initiative as yardmaster. But he was a good worker.

He came at the young train dispatcher, swinging his arms and yelling at the top of his voice:

"What do you know about this? These—these puppy-dogs! That fried egg that run the switcher—Aw! What's the use talkin'? He's took it on the run. He'd better. I'd have knocked his head off if he hadn't run twice as fast as I could with my game leg."

"What's the answer, Dooley? What do you suppose I can do for you?"

"You can handle that kettle. You've got to——"

"What, *me?*" gasped Ralph. "I'm not an engineer any more. You want to ruin my reputation, Dooley?"

"Stop blitterin'," scolded the old yardmaster. "I know you, Ralph Fairbanks. You are workin' for the Great Northern just as I am. Look at the fireboy there, Jimmy. He stuck. But he ain't allowed by the rules to handle the throttle that his superior deserted."

"And you expect me to break the rules?"

"You still have your Brotherhood card. I know it. You are in good standing. We have got to show these mutts that real men don't throw the road down—and cut off their own food supply—to run after that crazy Andy McCarrey."

"All right. I'm with you, as far as that goes," said Ralph quickly. "But I don't know about this thing you ask me to do. My own job——"

"You are not on the job now. That I know full well," said the anxious yardmaster. "Do, for the love of Mike, Ralph, get aboard that dirty little kettle and kick together the cars for west-bound Eighty-seven. She's scheduled to leave the yard, as you well know, in twenty-five minutes," and he snapped his big watch back into his pocket.

"What will the super say?" asked Ralph weakly.

The idea was taking hold of him. After all, the blood in his veins was the blood of the engine-driver! Once an engineer, always an engineer. Ralph could not get away from the fact that his fingers thrilled—and always would thrill—to the touch of the throttle and the Johnson bar.

Dooley wildly said his say about the supervisor while he grabbed Ralph's arm and half dragged him over to the steaming switch engine.

Jimmy, the faithful fireman, stood on the little deck.

"You know Mist' Fairbanks, Jimmy," said the yardmaster. "He'll help us out. The saints will be good to you, boy, for sticking to the fire-shovel and bar. Now, git busy. Here's the list for Eighty-seven, Ralph. I've kept the crew together. Nagle is captain. Go to it!"

He hurried away as Ralph slowly climbed aboard. The young fellow had no more right on the little switcher than an outsider. But the situation demanded drastic action. And if Mr. Hopkins did not appear to interfere, Ralph might help out the old yardmaster in this emergency.

In a way, too, he was helping himself. If Eighty-seven did not get out of the yard somewhere near on time, the train would ball up the train dispatcher's schedule.

Ralph grabbed the suit of overalls the fireman threw him and struggled into them. The steam was up and there was plenty of coal in the bunker. He tried the water-gauge himself, then felt out the various levers and cocks under his hand. A lantern was giving him the "high sign" down the yard. He opened her up carefully and trundled the little engine out on the cluttered track.

Under the radiance of the fixed bull's-eye beside him, Ralph scrutinized the numbers of the cars in the string he was expected to pick up. Here were four gondolas loaded with pig-iron first on the list. Really, in making up a well-balanced freight, these four cars should come about the middle of the train, to "stiffen her back." So much weight next the locomotive made hard switching and, when the regular engine crew took the train for the western pull, they certainly would blame the yard crew for making it up so clumsily.

But Ralph saw that the four gondolas fairly "blanked" the remainder of the train—like a broken cork in the neck of a bottle. Had there been full and plenty of time, he would have shunted the heavy cars upon a siding and picked them up after laying out about half the cars that were on the list the yardmaster had given him.

Nagle, the conductor of Eighty-seven, ran along and boarded the switcher as Ralph dropped her down to couple on to the gondolas. Nagle's eyes popped open like a scared cat's when he saw who was handling the switcher's throttle.

"Jerusalem! is the G. M. himself going to take a hand in this strike, too, I dunno?" he demanded.

"I shouldn't wonder. I have seen him take to

the deck of a mountain hog himself on occasion, Nagle," admitted Ralph.

"It's right you are. And more than me is remembering that same, Ralph, when these crazy loons ask us to go out with them against the orders of our Brotherhood chiefs. We've worked hand in hand with the old G. M. and many another of the brass-collared crew on this road. These poor simps that are following McCarrey will be sorry enough in the end."

"I am glad to hear one man talking sense, Nagle," said Ralph. "Now, how do these cars stand?"

"Of course, you know these four you've grappled are the worst of the lot?"

"It looks so. And whoever drove them in here must have known he was going to make the yard crew trouble."

"Like enough. There are more soreheads on this division at the present time than you can shake a stick at! And no wonder. That super——"

"Old stuff! Old stuff, Nagle!" advised Ralph, in haste. "Time is flying."

"What will you do with these four gondolas?"

"I am going to throw them onto number four switch. They can't stay there but five minutes,

of course, for Number Twenty-eight is due then. But if we work smartly we may get half a dozen boxes tacked on ahead of the gondolas."

"Good boy!" and the conductor swung down to the cinder path.

"Put a couple of huskies on those gondolas. They must brake at the right time," warned Ralph.

The conductor waved his hand. A moment later, as Ralph eased the heavy quartette of cars into motion, he saw two brakemen climb aboard —one at the head and one at the tail of the four. He knew that, properly governed by the hand brakes, those two brakemen could place the gondolas just right on number four siding.

It was a short piece of track. It opened at the lower end right out onto the eastbound main track. The switcher dragged the heavy cars up and out into the clear and then "kicked" them off onto the short siding.

The coupling pin was tripped and the switcher came to a stop. Ralph leaned far out to watch the rolling stock slow down.

"Looks to me as though that far brakie is taking his time winding up," the fireman shouted.

"Who is that fellow? Hi! Make the switch on the fly, Jimmy, and we'll run down——"

"Here comes Twenty-eight, sir!" said Jimmy

quickly. "If that fellow hasn't stopped her in the clear——"

They just then got the high sign from down the yard. The long freight then due was steaming in. Ralph had a feeling that all was not right with those heavy gondolas. They had been stopped, and of course were braked. Yet the fellow on the tail-end seemed to have been very slow about the work. He was the only person who knew whether or not the four cars of pig-iron were too near the main track.

The switcher had to answer the far signal. Ralph ran her ahead and then backed onto the cross-over and so upon the long siding where he was to pick up the next batch of cars. The whistle of Twenty-eight's locomotive suddenly emitted a signal.

"Something's the matter, boss!" yelled Jimmy, swinging himself up to the deck again.

And on the heels of what he said, and before the switcher carried them within sight of the tail-end of the four gondolas, there sounded a ripping crash that awoke the echoes over half of Rockton! On the instant the head end of Twenty-eight, save her locomotive, was scattered over both main tracks. The yard was blocked!

CHAPTER XII

TREACHERY

THE heavy freight train broke in two. The locomotive plowed on for a few rods, and stopped. The switcher which Ralph Fairbanks was driving stopped just opposite the wreck.

One glance was all that was necessary to show Ralph the cause of the disaster. The four heavily laden gondolas had been allowed to run a few feet too far. The corner of the gondola at the end stuck out over the curve of the switch and the first box car on Number Twenty-eight had caught upon its steel corner.

This corner had ripped the sides of two box cars open; then the ruined cars had crashed over onto the other main track. Two following cars had jumped the rails and——

"A four hour job for the wrecking crew, aside from the damage done," declared Ralph to Nagle, when he came running up with Dooley, the yardmaster. "Where is the brakie you sent to guard that tail-end, Nagle?"

"The rascal!" yelled the conductor. "He's

taken it on the run. We haven't had him on the line but a few weeks. It is my opinion there are a lot of wabblies got jobs on this division just for the chance of hurting the road."

"I'll fix 'em if I catch 'em!" yelled Dooley, almost frothing at the mouth he was so wild.

The whistle was blowing the signal for the wrecking crew. All that Ralph could do was to go on with his task. As it happened, the wreck would not interfere with getting Number Eighty-seven out of the yard.

He picked up one bunch after another of the cars numbered on his list, while the derrick was being brought up to clear the tracks and jack the unhorsed cars upon the rails again. Ralph knew that his assistant would be much troubled by this break in the schedule; but there were certain routine things to do about it, and that was all. Trains would have to be held outside in both directions until the main tracks in the yard were cleared.

Not more than twenty minutes late the young fellow saw the big mogul backed down to the long string of cars and coupled on. The switcher was steaming on a side track, waiting for the next job. Eighty-seven pulled out of the yard safely and soon its parting hoot-too-hoot! could be heard beyond the hill.

"Now what?" asked Ralph, as Dooley came along with another clip of papers in his hand.

So much had been going on during the last few minutes that he had quite forgotten his own schedule. The excited Dooley was about to pass him up his list for the next freight when a tall figure came striding across the tracks from the vicinity of the wreck.

"Cheese it!" gasped the fireman. "Here comes the Great-I-Am."

Mr. Barton Hopkins showed in his face about as much expression as Ralph had ever seen him display. And that expression was one of anger.

"What is going on here, Yardmaster?" he demanded harshly. "Are you ready with your report on that accident yonder?"

"I don't know much about it," said the boss doubtfully. "I didn't see it. Mebbe Mr. Fairbanks, here——"

This was shifting the responsibility in good truth. At another time Ralph might have been angry at Dooley. But he knew that the old man was much perturbed. Mr. Hopkins turned his scowling visage on the young train dispatcher.

"What is Mr. Fairbanks doing on that switch engine?" asked the supervisor. "I understand that he was at fault in this accident. He kicked the pig-iron cars too far over the switch."

"Look here, Mr. Hopkins!" exclaimed Ralph, leaning from the window of the little cabin in sudden heat. "Who told you any such thing as that?"

"I am so informed. My informant will doubtless appear at the proper time—when the case is thrashed out in my office."

"I'll have some testimony to bring in, too, at that," said Ralph hotly. "Only I doubt right here and now, Mr. Hopkins, your power to take me into your office. I am train dispatcher of this division——"

"Stick to your job, then," put in Mr. Hopkins sharply. "I ask you: What are you doing on that switch engine?"

Ralph came down from the deck on the run. He tore off the overalls. His face blazed. He had to wait a moment to control his voice he was so angry.

"If you think I have stepped in here where I have no business, believe me, I can get out," he said. "I had no idea of turning in a time card for what I was doing. I helped out because I wanted to see things move. Dooley——"

"Mr. Dooley much overstepped his authority when he allowed you to drive that switcher. He knew it—and knows it, now."

"What in thunder would I have done, Mr. Hop-

kins?" broke in the excited yardmaster. "Not a man on the list could I call——"

"It was a matter to put up to your superior."

"Well, now!" roared the angry old man, "where was *you* when I needed to start things going after that danged striker hopped his job? Should I sit down and let the yard go stale and all this freight hang fire while I waited to consult you, Mr. Hopkins?"

"That is exactly what you should have done," declared the supervisor in the same decisive way.

"Great Grief and Jumping Dromedaries!" yelled Dooley, and he literally went up into the air. "It is no wonder the men are striking. I don't blame 'em! I am on strike myself from this moment——"

He threw the clip of papers into the air, and it went hurtling over the nearest line of boxcars. His cap he snatched from his head and flung it yards away in the other direction. The man was for the moment mad!

"I'm on strike! I'm on strike meself!" he bawled. "Me, that's never gone out with the boys no matter what happened, for the last thutty years. I'm on strike!"

"You are mistaken, Dooley," cut in the icy voice of the supervisor. "You have not struck. You are discharged. Hand in your time and go.

You are discharged for insubordination and inefficiency. I'll take your keys."

"Well," said Ralph, talking it over later with his assistant operator as they were trying to untangle the trains in the yard and those waiting on the near-by blocks, "we must hand it to supervisor Barton Hopkins. He is personally efficient. He found a day man to take poor Dooley's place, he got a man for the switcher, and he dressed down the whole yard crew and set them to work again in an hour."

"But how long are they going to work?" grumbled the operator. "They all act like whipped dogs. That isn't the way to run a division."

"It is his way of running it. And the G. M. says he is suiting the stockholders and directors right down to the ground. Oh, the railroad business is on the toboggan!"

"Ha ha!" croaked the operator. "You sound like these other old stagers. I haven't been in the game so long as you have, Fairbanks, although I am older than you. The pay is good and the hours not bad. Believe me! I've had worse jobs than train dispatching."

"Oh, so have I. But I feel at a time like this that I'd like to be into the game right, instead of

sitting up here overlooking a railroad yard and making pin-pricks on a road map."

"Going back to the locomotive lever?"

"Do you know," said Ralph earnestly and softly, "while I was fiddling down there on that little old yard engine, I felt *right*. I wouldn't want my mother to know it, for she always worried when I had a run, but I believe I was born for the throttle. I'm an engineer, and I always will be."

The morning paper was full of the strike of the shopmen, and the threat was made by McCarrey that the yardmen and switchers would be out within twenty-four hours.

"We're going to stop every wheel from turning on this division of the Great Northern," the strike leader told the reporters. "And before we are through, we'll plug both ends of the system so tight that the officials will have to come to our terms."

"How about the Brotherhoods?" he was asked.

"That is bunk," McCarrey declared. "The Brotherhood members are practically all with us. They don't have to strike. We are going to strike for them. The roads can't run trains if they have no shop workers or maintenance of way men. The engineers and firemen won't take out

trains after a while when they can't get repairs made or road work kept up or switching done. No, sir, we've got 'em where we want 'em. Watch us."

"I guess they ought to be watched, all right," Ralph told his mother at his late breakfast. "I wonder what Zeph is doing? I wonder where Mr. Adair is?"

"I should think you wouldn't worry about them," said the widow. "They have their own work. You have yours, Ralph. Please don't get mixed up in this ugly business."

"I guess you are quite right, Mother," he said gravely. "I am glad to be in the train dispatching department. Of course, we are going to have a great deal of trouble putting any schedule through. But I do not believe the telegraphers will go on strike. My men, at least, are faithful."

"Faithful to you or to the road?" asked his mother.

"To both, I firmly believe," said Ralph confidently. "Why, I can't understand any responsible employee going out for so little cause. Hopkins has made them all sore, it is true. But they can't give that as a good reason. And the cut in wages was only threatened. The Brotherhoods took their cut months ago, even if it was a bitter pill to swallow. It is mainly such men

as McCarrey who really are not even railroad men. Why, he never had a job on the Great Northern, as I understand."

"Do you actually believe that he followed Mr. Hopkins here to make trouble?"

"I bet he did. But it is Hopkins' own fault if he gives McCarrey a chance to make trouble."

Mrs. Fairbanks sighed. "I am sorry for his family. You say his daughter is an attractive girl, Ralph?"

"That's the surest thing you know, Mother," declared Ralph, smiling reflectively. "I had her on the wire last evening when I sent word to her father that the shopmen had gone out. She has a sweet voice."

His mother looked at him again in some doubt.

"I never knew you to be so greatly interested in a girl before, Ralph."

"I never knew a girl before who was so worth while," he replied. "And there's no nonsense about her. You'll like her when you know her, Mother."

CHAPTER XIII

NEWS FROM SHADOW VALLEY

THIS was a day to be remembered in Rockton. Ralph passed a parade of the wildcat strikers and their sympathizers on his way to the office. A good many of the marchers were drunk. That was bad, for it showed that somebody was furnishing a supply of liquor forbidden under the prohibition régime.

"I've an idea," Ralph thought to himself, "that McCarrey and Grif Falk have a secret place to store liquor in, in that old house where Zeph and I had our run-in with them the other night. Wish Zeph would show up. I'd like to know what he told Mr. Adair about it."

He saw uniformed police at the yard gates and standing at the railroad crossing when he got downtown. But he observed none of the men in plain clothes he knew who belonged to the railroad police. Mr. Adair did not believe in making a show of force at a time of trouble like this, if it could be avoided.

Extras of the evening papers soon began to appear on the street. Wild rumors were rife. It was said that the maintenance of way men on other divisions of the Great Northern were about to walk out.

The day shifts of men in the Rockton shops had not even come to work. The yard crews, who were more closely affiliated with the big Brotherhoods, were remaining at work. And yet, as Ralph could easily sense, nothing was going right in the yard or around the offices.

The clerks in the freight offices had some kind of association with McCarrey's new union, and when Ralph had occasion to go down the platform he saw these clerks buzzing like mad bees.

"If the super comes this way these fellows will get something in their ears they won't want to hear," Ralph remarked to one of the platform men. "How do you stand, Mandell?"

"I stand for my bread and butter. I've always got my wages regularly and been treated decently by the road; at least, until this Hopkins came. I've been here fifteen years and have seen five or six supers come and go. I may be here fifteen more and see as many supers in charge. If this Hopkins tells me I can't spit on the platform, well, then, I'll go spit over the side. Ha! Them shopmen last night boiling out of the shop

because of a simple order like that! They're a bunch of dumb-bells."

All the employees did not feel the same way, however; and that Ralph right well knew. He believed it would not take much more to cause the yard workers, the switchmen, the freight clerks, and other employees, to desert their jobs.

He had very little time to give thought to this or other general matters. That wreck in the yard the night before had balled the service up badly.

The Midnight Flyer had got out ten minutes late and Byron Marks had been unable to make up even that small handicap in the four hours' run to Hammerfest. There was a protest from the general manager about this. It did not touch Ralph's department, of course; but it was sent to him in duplicate. He knew that the supervisor would be red hot.

When Marks brought his train back that day he had managed to make time. Ralph himself had kept the tracks clear for him, and the old fellow should have been thankful. But Mr. Hopkins met the express on the platform as it steamed to a stop.

In that cold voice of his, and with a careful selection of words that bit like acid on a man's soul, the supervisor reprimanded the old engineer

before his crew and all the idlers who had gathered around. It was an unkind thing to do; and yet, there was good reason for the supervisor's anger.

Ralph stood by and listened. The locomotive that drew the flyer and this return train was practically new. It was the latest thing in a coal-burning, Class-A locomotive. Marks had every chance, it would seem, to make the schedule, close as it was. Another driver could have done it, Ralph was sure.

The old engineer swung down from the cab and allowed one of his firemen to take the machine out to the roundhouse. He had his lunch-can and coat with him. He stood like a whipped dog and took the tongue-lashing the supervisor gave to him. Ralph had to go away from there. He could not listen to it. Byron Marks did not possess a proper sense of his own position.

The young train dispatcher hoped that the old man would ask for a substitute for the next run. But he appeared at night in season to take the big locomotive out of the roundhouse. He had one virtue, at least. Stubbornness.

That day had been an anxious one around divisional headquarters. Ralph had gone home for supper as usual; but he had come right down-

town again. The strikers were holding a continuous meeting in Beeman Hall and the police were in attendance to keep the speakers from going too far. It was told Ralph that many yardmen, switchmen and section men had attended the meeting and that the small unions of railroad workers were all but disorganized.

One shop was running with a crippled crew. The supervisor certainly was efficient himself. He could report that the wheels in that shop were turning. Ralph saw that Mr. Hopkins was on the job this evening. Plainclothes men, belonging to the railroad squad, were on duty about the terminal, roundhouse, and yard.

Every hour or so some part of the planned schedule for the trains on the division had to be scrapped. Ralph was glad he was on hand this evening when these changes had to be made. Johnny was a good man, but he was beginning to get rattled. And a train dispatcher who loses his head endangers everything.

It was along in the evening and the traffic was easing up for a while in the terminal yards when a message addressed to "Chief Dispatcher, Rockton" came over the wire, and Johnny took it off.

"Shadow Valley," he said. "That is where the Midnight Flyer always loses time. What kind of country is that?"

"A wild place. The Shadow Valley Station is at this end; Oxford is at the far end. Some fifty miles long. The Midnight Flyer stops at both stations. Little but timber towns in between. Great tourist country in the summer. Hullo! What's this?"

"It's in code, I reckon," said Johnny, seeing Ralph's puzzled face. "Haven't you got the key? It is aimed at you, all right."

Ralph repeated the message aloud:

"What is Whitey M. doing in Shadow Valley? Wake up B. A.—X. Y. Z."

"That is as mysterious as a hobo Mulligan," remarked Johnny, grinning.

"What do you know about that!" muttered Ralph, and without explaining to his assistant he went to the telephone booth with the telegram in his hand.

He was so well acquainted with the vagaries of Zeph Dallas' mind that he knew at once this was his signature. Zeph had just that twist to his mind that, if he were sent for a pail of milk, he would try to disguise both himself and the milk.

"There must be something doing over there at Shadow Valley," muttered Ralph. "And 'Whitey

M.' means just one person, and one only. I haven't seen that fellow since we had the run-in with him that night in the alley. Humph!"

He called down to the supervisor's office. If Bob Adair was in Rockton, Ralph believed the supervisor would know how to reach him. Ralph knew that Mr. Hopkins was in the building. But he was surprised to hear his voice almost immediately answer the telephone call.

The young fellow would have been even more surprised could he have seen who was with the supervisor at this hour. A man in a long dark coat and slouch hat had come into the supervisor's office unannounced not many minutes before. Mr. Hopkins had evidently been expecting him.

"Well, what do you find?" asked Hopkins, pushing his cigar box toward the visitor and lighting a cigar himself. Somehow the supervisor did not consider the use of tobacco an inefficient thing.

"Nothing to put our finger on as yet, Mr. Hopkins," was the reply. "Of course we might arrest McCarrey and his right-hand man, Falk. But we should have to let them go again for lack of holding evidence. There was a time—during the war—when we could have stopped them. But not now. Now a man can fire off his mouth about as much as he likes without getting

into trouble. These fellows aim their talk at the railroad, not at the Government."

"You should be able to get them on some count," declared Hopkins, smoking energetically. "McCarrey is stirring up the strikers to make trouble. I have had a written threat that the express passenger trains will be stopped. You know what that would mean."

"All bull," said the other shortly.

"Perhaps. And perhaps not. I was hooted at by a gang as I came downtown to-night. They will soon begin to throw missiles and break windows."

"Then we will have them, individually," said the visitor, with some satisfaction.

"Ha!" grumbled Mr. Hopkins. "Somebody lights a fire and you retrieve the burned match. But you don't stop the fire. The fellows you arrest for throwing stones—or cabbages—will not be the dangerous ones. McCarrey and Falk and those others go scot-free."

"They are too sharp to really break the law—unless it is with their mouths," the other admitted.

"You should be able to round up the whole gang of trouble-instigators and put them in jail."

"You expect the impossible."

"I do not know that. You have only just now come to Rockton——"

"I have had my men here. One of my helpers spotted that hide-out I tell you about—with the help of young Ralph Fairbanks."

"Ha! *That* fellow?"

"The smartest boy working for the Great Northern," declared the visitor promptly. "That old ranch McCarrey and his men hang out in is a storehouse for liquors, I believe—and perhaps worse. I am having the place watched. But one of McCarrey's closest friends has disappeared. Would certainly like to know what has become of Whitey Malone."

It was just at this moment that the supervisor's telephone rang. At this hour there were no clerks to answer the call. Mr. Hopkins excused himself and went into the booth and closed the door.

When he came out he was red with anger and his pale blue eyes flashed. His visitor appeared to overlook the supervisor's disturbance. He said:

"This Whitey Malone has been McCarrey's messenger and dirt-carrier. From the moment the shopmen struck, Whitey disappeared, so they tell me. I am going to send out a general order to apprehend the fellow wherever he is found. We will risk a little something. I understand he is really on probation and the magistrate might send him to jail if he appears not to be working."

The supervisor evidently had his own matters to think of. He did not even grunt.

"I wonder if Ralph Fairbanks knows anything about Whitey," considered Hopkins' visitor aloud, and slyly watching the supervisor.

The question finally brought the latter to life. He flushed up to his bald brow.

"*That* fellow? He is perfectly useless. I will put a flea into the directors' ears about him," Hopkins snarled, with unusual show of his feelings.

The other got up, lazily stretched himself and nodded. "Just so. Matter of opinion, Mr. Hopkins," he said. "Some of us think quite well of Ralph. You see, we have known him since he was a kid-hostler about the roundhouse. Good-night."

"Good-night," returned Barton Hopkins shortly.

CHAPTER XIV

A TRAGEDY

THERE was a fight down by one of the stockade gates not long after Ralph telephoned to Mr. Hopkins to learn if the supervisor knew anything about Bob Adair. It might as well be said that the young train dispatcher got no satisfaction from Barton Hopkins.

"I am not giving information of railroad affairs to anybody, Fairbanks, and you should know that," the supervisor had said shortly. "If the chief detective wishes to interview you, he doubtless will know how to find you."

"But I've got some information for him!" ejaculated Ralph.

Mr. Hopkins hung up without further reply. He evidently considered it sheer impudence for the train dispatcher to have called him. It was within the next ten minutes that the row started at the yard gate.

Ralph grabbed his cap and ran down to see what it was all about. The time was verging toward midnight. Freight trains had been made

up as usual and sent out. But outside the railroad property a crowd had been gathering, and the yard crews were hooted and threatened.

The train dispatcher was too late to take any part in the fight. But he learned that the attack had been made upon several of the members of the night train crews that were coming in by this gate because it was nearest to the roundhouse.

The police had charged and aided the railroad men in driving back the strike sympathizers. Missiles had been thrown and one of the men attacked had had his coat torn off. When Ralph got close to this man he saw that it was old Byron Marks, engineer of the fast express.

"For pity's sake, By!" he demanded, as he aided the old engineer away from the center of the mêlée, "why didn't you come around the other way?"

"I didn't want to see that blamed supervisor again," gasped the engineer, wiping the blood from his scratched face. Then he held a hand tightly upon his heart as though to still it. He was very pale, save for crimson spots beneath his cheekbones. "I'd rather fight these rats than talk to Hopkins."

"Be a man!" exclaimed Ralph. "Don't let that man scare you."

"He's no easy man to meet," returned the old

engineer. "He can put the gaff into you, if he likes."

"The Brotherhood is behind you. Tell him where he gets off. The road is short of engineers. He won't dare tie the can to you. You know that."

"Don't talk! Don't talk, Ralph!" whispered the engineer. "I know what is threatening me better than you do. I'm growing old. And I can't afford to drop out on a pittance."

"Why, you must have something, Byron," said the train dispatcher. "After all these years at a good wage——"

"Nothing. Just a little home. And that mortgaged. Sickness in the family and an invalid child has taken all I could make. Death in a wreck, or the like, is the only good thing that could come to me."

"My gracious! Don't talk like that."

"It is true. I carry a big accident policy. If I'm killed my family is well fixed. If I get canned, we'll starve. That's about the size of it," and the old man walked away, leaving Ralph with a lump in his throat.

"And I've been blaming this old fellow for not pulling out and letting some younger man have his run," thought the young train dispatcher bitterly. "We never know! Old Byron de-

serves pity, not blame. A long life gone, and nothing much to show for it. Well!"

The rabble was driven back and broken up by the police. Two or three rioters were arrested. And that, as Ralph knew, did more harm than good. Every strike sympathizer that was arrested made a whole family sore at the railroad. The strikers themselves were sharp enough to keep away from the scene of trouble.

The big eight-wheeler was being rolled out of the roundhouse as Ralph turned back toward the brick station. He saw By Marks, his face washed of blood, and now in a clean overall suit, sitting on the bench in the driver's side of the cabin, as the huge locomotive wheeled across the turntable.

"Good luck to you, old man!" cried Ralph, and waved his hand to the grave-faced engineer.

Afterward Ralph was glad he had given Byron this hail. The long train of varnished cars had been standing under the train shed for half an hour. The train on the other road rolled in at the far end of the station and the passengers piled out and joined those already occupying their staterooms or berths in the coaches of the Midnight Flyer.

Suddenly Ralph was halted. A hand had fallen

heavily on his shoulder and he turned swiftly to look at the person who had touched him. It was the tall man in the long black coat who had been sitting in the office of the supervisor. Ralph cried out with satisfaction.

"Mr. Adair! I certainly am glad to see you!"

"I was looking for you, Ralph. But I supposed you were at home at this hour and I hated to disturb your mother," said the chief detective of the Great Northern system.

"Oh, no. I am around the offices now, every night. Until this Midnight Flyer pulls out, at least."

"I don't suppose the supervisor knows that, does he?" asked Adair dryly.

"He knows it to-night, anyway," said Ralph, grimly. "I was just asking him for you—or if he knew where you were."

"Indeed? And he said he didn't know?"

"He gave me to understand that he was not giving out information to underlings," and Ralph laughed shortly. "Oh, well! let that pass. I had something to show you, and here it is."

He hauled out the strange message that he believed had come from Zeph Dallas. Mr. Adair read it swiftly.

"That's just the thing I wanted to know!"

he exclaimed. "Hang that Hopkins, anyway! He takes himself as altogether too important. Why, Malone is the man I am after!"

"You don't really think that poor, half-witted fellow can be of real importance in any conspiracy against the road?" asked Ralph, wonderingly.

"He has got wit enough to give evidence in court. And he is the sort to turn state's evidence if he is cornered. The use of such fellows as Malone by men of the calibre of McCarrey is our main chance in bringing the latter to book.

"McCarrey has to engage Whitey Malone and others like him to do his dirty work. He has some plan against the division that Malone is to help put through. If the latter is down there at Shadow Valley, as Zeph intimates, I am going to make that neighborhood the main point of my investigation."

"But the strikers are here in Rockton!" cried Ralph.

"Foolish as these shopmen and the other strikers are, I would not accuse any of them of being angry enough to commit an overt act against the road. Especially of the nature of train wrecking."

"I should hope not!" gasped Ralph.

"Yet we have received written threats to that effect," said Adair gloomily. "This very train,"

and he nodded toward the long line of Pullmans standing beside the platform waiting for the locomotive to back down, "is on the list of those that somebody has threatened to stop."

"The Midnight Flyer?"

"Yes. Here comes the old mill. Wait. By Marks is not the fellow for this job, Ralph," and the detective shook his head.

"He's all right!" exclaimed the young train dispatcher hastily. He was determined to commend the aged engineer after this, not criticize him. "I know that nobody could take that express through to Hammerfest much better than he does. And I am the fellow who makes the schedule."

"Indeed?" rejoined his friend, with a curious look at Ralph. "Suppose you were pulling this train?"

"Humph! Think I would be any better than an experienced old engineer like By? What nonsense, Mr. Adair!"

But the latter only laughed. They were at the head of the train. There was a little group of station employees and others on the platform. Ralph was watching the slowly backing locomotive. He saw the pallid face of Marks thrust out of the window as the great machine backed against the head coach. The red spots in Mark's

cheeks, Ralph thought, were slowly fading out.

The couplings came together with a crunch of steel. The locomotive was stopped on the instant—a pretty connection. Nobody but a skilled operative could have done it.

"He's all right, old as he is!" muttered Ralph, as the two firemen leaped down to make the air-hose and water-hose connections on either side of the tender.

The train dispatcher walked forward on the engineer's side of the cab. He looked up again at the old man in the window. Then he cried out and leaped up the steps to the locomotive's deck.

Byron Marks' head had fallen upon the window sill. His eyes were still staring, wide open. But the color had now entirely receded from his cheeks. When Ralph put a tentative hand upon the old man's shoulder the torso of his body wabbled dreadfully.

The hand on the throttle relaxed and fell. At the instant the engineer had made the nicely balanced coupling, he had lost consciousness!

CHAPTER XV

ONCE MORE ON THE RAILS

THE doctor, who had been brought from just across the street from the station, pronounced it "heart." Either over-excitement or overwork. It was no accident; just a death from natural causes.

Then, thought Ralph, how about the big accident policy Byron Marks had carried and paid on all these years?

But at just this moment there were other matters of importance to think of. Supervisor Hopkins had at once bustled out to see what had happened. In five minutes the Midnight Flyer was scheduled to pull out of the Rockton terminal.

"Here, boy!" he said, grabbing one of the youngsters who called the crews from their boarding houses. "Let's see your list. What! Nothing but freight crews?"

"And there ain't one of 'em but has put in twelve hours and has got to take his eight hours' sleep," said the boy. "They'd half kill me if I tried to pry 'em out of the hay."

"Wait until your advice is called for, boy," responded Mr. Hopkins shortly.

The boy winked behind the supervisor's back and some of the bystanders chuckled. The supervisor pored over the list.

"Not a passenger engine crew free until two-thirty."

"And then," pointed out the night station master, who had likewise appeared, "that crew must take out Number Fourteen."

"I want none of *your* advice, Cummings," snapped the supervisor.

But Cummings was a gray-haired official and not easily browbeaten.

"You'd better listen to somebody, Mr. Hopkins," he said doggedly. "I know the boys on the list quite as well as you do—perhaps better, considerin' I've seen many of them growin' up in the road's employ. There's freight engineers, and there's passenger engineers. Many an engineer tries pulling the varnished cars and is glad to drop back into an easy-going freight run. Though there is little on the division that is really easy-going now."

"Well, well?" said Hopkins, impatiently.

Cummings raised his eyebrows and glanced from Bob Adair to Ralph.

"There's not a man on that list as well able to

pull Number Two-o-two as old By was, God rest him! And he couldn't make the grade, as the saying is. This Midnight Flyer is a disgrace to the division!"

"What do you mean?" demanded the supervisor angrily.

"Just what I say. It is a disgrace. It doesn't keep to schedule half the time. It is the laughing-stock on the system. You know it. Somebody has got to sit on that bench that can get better time out of the mill than ever it has made yet."

"Well, we cannot think of that now. We have to send out the train. The engineer that can show a card—any engineer—is the one we want, and must have."

He wheeled as though to hurry away on his quest. Cummings tapped him with a finger on the shoulder.

"Wait, Mr. Hopkins," he said.

"What is it?" snapped the supervisor.

"You're going right away from about the only fellow that can help you out," Cummings said with some complacency. "Don't you see this boy here?" and he clapped a jovial hand upon Ralph's shoulder.

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed the young train dispatcher. "None of that, Mr. Cummings. I am not looking for any more trouble."

But the old station master waved an airy hand. He held Barton Hopkins' attention.

"I know that Ralph is in good standing with the Brotherhood. He is the best little engineman there is on the division. If there is a man to-night can take this train through to Hammerfest anywhere near on time, it is him. The road is like a book to him——

"Ah! what's the matter with you, boy?" he added, turning to face the young fellow. "What are you—a man, or a monkey, I want to know? What does it matter what people say or think? You are working for the Great Northern and you've got the good of the road at heart. Isn't that so?"

"You know it!" exclaimed Ralph, half angrily.

"All right. Here is the supervisor. He wants the best man he can get for the job because *he* is all for the road's interest——"

"I do not know that Fairbanks is fit for any such task," put in Mr. Hopkins, in his very coldest tone. "I doubt if one so young is fit for any important and responsible position. At least, I am very sure that his exhibition of engine driving in the yard here the other evening does not bear out the ability you claim for him, Cummings."

"What's that?" demanded the station master, angrily.

"I have felt it my duty to send in, attached to the report of that wreck in the yard the other evening, the fact that all rules of the road were violated by Mr. Fairbanks in trying to handle the switch engine; and, as well, that in my opinion the wreck would not have occurred had it not been for Fairbanks' oversight. He shunted those heavily loaded gondolas too far into the switch——"

"Nothing of the kind!" exclaimed Ralph, interrupting, in anything but a respectful tone. "The train crews and yard crews are honeycombed with treachery, and you daren't accuse me of such a thing. I won't stand for *that,* Mr. Hopkins, and don't you think it!"

"Hold on! Hold on!" admonished Mr. Adair in his ear.

"Now, this is too much!" cried the young train dispatcher. "I would not help him out now at any price. Why, unless the G. M. himself told me to take the throttle on that old mill, I wouldn't touch it!"

He swung on his heel, panting in his anger, and ran right against a bulky figure in an ulster, his hat brim drawn down over his eyes. Ralph re-

coiled with a surprised grunt. The man grabbed him.

"Hold on!" he said. "I heard you. That train has got to pull out in two minutes. I order you, Fairbanks, to get up into the cab and make that engine behave. You've made the schedule. Let's see if you can make the Midnight Flyer conform to it. How's that?"

Mr. Adair broke into a hearty laugh. But neither the station master nor Ralph, and surely not the supervisor of the division, had previously any idea of the general manager's presence at the terminal. He had stood back and listened to all that had been said since the unfortunate old engineer had been carried out of the station.

"You take this matter entirely out of my hands, sir?" Hopkins asked, his voice shaking.

"I do," rejoined the general manager.

"I think you overlook the fact that you are interfering in my province."

"No, I don't overlook it. But you come back to the office with me, Hopkins, and I believe I can show you where it is for the road's interest to send Ralph out with this train. There's the gong!"

"Send word to my mother!" cried Ralph to Adair, and made a flying leap for the locomotive steps. The two firemen, who had listened in

no little interest and anxiety to the foregoing conversation, sprang to their proper positions. They grinned for they both knew Ralph and liked him.

It was a fact that there was not a locomotive on the division that the train dispatcher had not tried out at one time or another. As he had confessed he was, after all, an engineer by instinct. He slid into the seat so recently occupied by the dead engineer, and his hand closed on the throttle.

The exhaust coughed through the smokestack. The bell jangled. He let the steam into the cylinders. The drivers groaned and rolled almost on the instant of the conductor shouting his second "All aboard!"

As smooth as silk, the train rolled out of the station. Adair and Cummings waved their hands to the young fellow on whom an important duty had again devolved. He opened the throttle up wider. The wheels began to drum over the rail joints in a tune that thrilled his blood.

"Once again on the rails!" he breathed. "This is the life!"

CHAPTER XVI

THROUGH SHADOW VALLEY

Hoo! Too-hoo-hoo!

The man on the other bench pulled the whistle cord for each crossing and station, but the huge eight-driver engine and its long tail of varnished cars sped past the switch targets and the station lights with no decrease of speed.

The other fireman sprayed the coal into the firebox door, keeping an even bed of living embers from which the lambent flames sprang like live tongues. Occasionally Ralph stepped back upon the deck to look over the fireman's shoulder into the hot maw of the box.

The two firemen changed places every hour. And Ralph did not wonder at this. When he had served his time with the shovel and bar it was on no such mighty machine as this that drew the Midnight Flyer. The mountain climbers and moguls had been big enough in those days. But this was even a more powerful locomotive than the oil-burners, of which the Great Northern owned several.

One man could never have fed the furnace of this engine for four hours—the length of the run. They had to spell each other. The attempt to make the schedule across the country from Rockton to Hammerfest was no small job!

The minute he had got the long train out of the Rockton yard, Ralph had set his mind to the work of arriving at Hammerfest on time. After all, a good locomotive engineer pulls his train with his head more than by any bodily exertion.

Sitting on the bench with the throttle within easy touch, Ralph for the most part gazed ahead at the rails glimmering under the white radiance of the headlight. It was true that he knew almost every foot of this road as a boy knows his own back yard.

Here, he remembered, was a level with a sharp curve at the end. He took three quarters of the straight stretch at top speed; then he shut off the steam and went around the sudden curve so easily that few of the passengers, unless they were awake, would know anything about it.

For not only does the engineer of a fast and expensive train have to make time, but he must run the train so well and with such precision as to make a reputation for the road and the train which will bring passengers back over the route.

On the mild grades Ralph could use the steam

so skillfully that the speedometer registered the same speed as on the levels. Nor had his firemen anything to complain of.

"We got to hand it to you, Boss," said one of the firemen, as Ralph slowed to a stop at Shadow Valley Station. "You don't waste the precious steam. But poor old By was a hog for it, going up a grade."

This point was a big summer resort place and had several hotels. There was a junction here, too, with a small line, and a Y. Of course, at this hour of the night the station was practically empty save for the station workers and the few people who wished to board the Flyer.

The workers, however, were increased in number by men whom Ralph, looking out of the cab window, marked as Mr. Adair's operatives. Each important station along the entire division was now guarded by railroad detectives. Ralph hoped he might see his friend, Zeph Dallas. The latter's queer telegram had been sent from this station. But he observed nobody who looked at all like the tall and gawky Zeph.

He got the conductor's sign and rolled out of the Shadow Valley Station exactly on the dot of the scheduled time. That alone was an achievement, although Ralph well knew that the hardest part of the run was ahead.

"Gee, Boss!" joked one of his crew, "I bet if you'd known you were going to hold the lever on this old mill you would have given us a little more time between here and Oxford, eh?"

Ralph laughed good-naturedly. It was true the cook had to drink his own broth. But when making up the schedule in the Rockton train dispatcher's office, the young fellow had been confident that under ordinary conditions the Midnight Flyer should hit the stopping point on the nick of time. Provided, of course, west-bound freight kept off the express train's time.

Through Shadow Valley there were several places where the going was hard. Ralph knew this quite well. But he had got the "feel" of the big eight-wheeler now and he believed that it could show even greater speed than it had ever recorded.

When they pulled out of the station he did not let the train merely coast down the first grade. He opened her throttle wide and she began to rock gently on the perfectly ballasted rails. The firemen began to exchange glances—they could not exchange speech at this speed—and realized that poor old Byron Marks had never got such speed out of the engine.

Ralph, of course, was taking a chance. The grade really called for brakes; but this was no

ordinary situation. He realized that if he was to make time at all, anywhere within the next fifty miles, it must be right here.

"Shadow Valley." Well named by some old pioneer with a poetic slant to his brain. When the moon shone the black reflections of cliffs and trees lay across the right of way of the railroad like blankets of black velvet.

The locomotive headlight cut these shadows like the stroke of a scimitar. Yard by yard the clear-way was revealed to the engineer as the train plunged down the slope. He was taking a chance—a big chance—Ralph knew, in opening the engine up in this way. Especially now that there had been threats made against the road by the strikers and their sympathizers.

All those people in the coaches behind him—most of them peacefully sleeping—stirred the young fellow's thought. He had pulled a Class-A passenger train before this night—many times, in fact—and had felt something of the same oppression of responsibility; but this case seemed particularly important.

Thick forest hid the bottom of the valley. When he glanced down he could see the pale moon silvering the tops of the firs and larches. The express seemed plunging into a vast and bottomless pool of black water.

He began to pull down for the curve at the bottom of the grade. This was always a dangerous point. Once, years before, Ralph had seen the wreck of the head-end of a freight piled up at the foot of this cliff which overhung the right-of-way.

Since that time the engineers of the Great Northern had broken off the granite overhang of the cliff above this spot and had seemingly made a repetition of that accident impossible.

Yet an enemy of the road might place some obstruction on the track just below the curve. Until the head of the locomotive was right at the turn, Ralph could not see what was ahead.

The road should have kept a signalman at this point, day and night. Never before had the young fellow so understood the weight of responsibility that rested on the engine driver's shoulders.

Perhaps it was because he was growing older. Or perhaps the recent sad happening to old Byron Marks had made a deep impression on Ralph Fairbanks' mind. At any rate, he felt that he would never round this curve again—or any other blind curve on the division—without experiencing a tremor of fear.

Suddenly a figure leaped into view, silhouetted against the silver tree tops beyond and behind

it, not on the dangerous side of the rails. It stood upon a high bowlder across the right-hand ditch. A tall, ghostly figure, the appearance of which made Ralph reach for the reverse lever with nervously crooked fingers.

Then he realized that it was some person who signalled "All clear" with arms like those of a semaphore. Somebody then was on watch here at this dangerous turn.

Ralph applied the brakes carefully, gently. The long train shuddered; but there was no harsh jouncing of the coaches. The wheels slid around the turn.

And as the ray of the headlight caught the figure on the bowlder for a moment, the young railroader knew who it was.

"Zeph!" he ejaculated, under his breath.

The young assistant of Bob Adair had selected the most perilous point in Shadow Valley to watch. While Zeph was there, Ralph might be pretty sure that no harm would befall the division trains.

He was carried past the bowlder swiftly. He leaned out to wave his arm and try to attract the notice of his friend. But the flash of the headlight's ray had undoubtedly blinded Zeph for the moment and there was no answering signal from him. However, as long as Zeph was

faithful at that post Ralph would feel little anxiety in approaching it.

The young engineer pulled on through the valley at top speed and then charged the hill to Oxford with four minutes to spare. Perfect running of a passenger train means keeping at an exact and harmonious speed for the entire distance between stops. In this case, however, Ralph knew that if he had not gained something on the schedule before striking the Oxford hill he never would have made that stop, as he did, exactly on the schedule moment.

The worst of the run for the Midnight Flyer was then behind him.

CHAPTER XVII

MORE DISCIPLINE

THAT run on the Midnight Flyer was a memorable one for Ralph Fairbanks, not alone because of the importance of the train to the schedule of the division, but because of the mental strain he was under all the way.

The general manager's congratulatory wire that was put into his hand when he climbed aboard his engine for the return trip from Hammerfest, of course pleased him; but the young railroader felt that there was something more due any engineer who pulled that Midnight Flyer and got it into the western terminal on time, as he had.

Up in those offices overlooking the Rockton yard, Ralph as chief of the train dispatching crew for the division, had got a little out of touch with the engineers and firemen. He acknowledged it now.

He had been complaining because many of the hard-working mechanics had not seemed to do their best in handling the division trains. Back

in the same harness that they wore, Ralph could appreciate their difficulties again.

"And that's the matter with Barton Hopkins," thought the young fellow. "He isn't as fit as I am, for instance, to manage these men. He never was an engineer, or sprayed coal into a firebox. No, sir! He doesn't know a thing about this end of railroading, save by theory.

"And mere theory is bound to get a man in wrong. Practise is the thing! I wonder how Hopkins will come out of this, if the strike becomes general? Why, the directors and stockholders who praise him so now will fairly crucify him if things go wrong and he is shown to be in any way at fault."

Ralph believed thoroughly that Barton Hopkins was at fault. Every man he talked to on the run was criticizing Supervisor Hopkins.

"They're all knocking the super. The anvil chorus on Hopkins' past, present, and future seems to be the most popular number on the division program," Ralph said to his two firemen.

"Should think you would join in, Fairbanks," said one of them. "You've got little to thank him for."

"There is something bigger than Barton Hopkins to consider," replied Ralph.

"Sure! The rules of the Brotherhood," was the quick reply.

"No! The welfare of the road. The Great Northern has supported me for some years. I mean to support it. When I can't do so I'll resign and get another job. But I won't bite the hand that has fed me for so long."

"You would not strike, then, even if the Brotherhood ordered it?" asked one of the firemen.

"Only for some very grave reason. Not over such a silly rule as those shopmen went out on."

"Oh, they had plenty of other grievances."

"So have we all. Everybody is sore in these times. It's in the air. Fault-finding seems to be a germ-producing disease," and Ralph grinned. "But make up your mind," and he added this earnestly, "I am not going to be bit by such a microbe as McCarrey. Not any!"

Perhaps his sane and sensible speech on every possible occasion did something toward keeping the better class of Great Northern employees steady. But when he got back to Rockton on the return trip he found the yards almost dead. The morning yard shift had gone out when they found that the new order of the supervisor's on the shop board applied to them as well.

At once, of course, the train dispatching department was balled up with late freights. But as it stood, Ralph had no part of that worry on his mind. Mr. Glidden had sent one of his best men from main headquarters to sit at Ralph's desk, and the latter started home through the bustling streets, weary but satisfied. He hoped to put in a long sleep before being called for the midnight run again.

Was it by chance, or with voluntary intention, that the young railroader went through the block on which Cherry Hopkins lived? He did not always walk home that way. But it was true some thought of the pretty girl was almost always in his mind at this time.

He had passed the Hopkins house without looking at it and was several yards beyond when he heard a door slam and a clear voice called to him:

"Ralph Fairbanks! Ralph Fairbanks!"

Ralph wheeled to see the girl, her bobbed hair flying, running down the path and out of the gate. But he saw something else, too. Coming along the sidewalk and increasing his stride as he saw and heard his daughter, was Mr. Barton Hopkins. His countenance displayed all the dislike and disapproval of Ralph that the latter knew the supervisor felt.

"Oh, Ralph!" cried the unconscious Cherry. "I want to speak to you."

Ralph walked back to meet her. He did not intend to run from Barton Hopkins. But he foresaw trouble for the pretty and impulsive girl.

"Oh, Ralph Fairbanks! I have heard what you did last night. It was fine of you—taking out the Flyer when the poor old engineer dropped dead. What a terrible thing that was!"

"You are right. It is a sorry thing for By's family. I understand he did not leave them well fixed."

"Won't the Brotherhood——"

"It will do all that is possible. But there is no real pension for an engineer's family. He only carried accident insurance. There must have always been something the matter with his heart that kept him from getting regular insurance. And he hid it."

"And was a criminal, thereby," said the harsh voice of Supervisor Hopkins behind his daughter. "Suppose that had happened—his death—when he was driving his engine on the road? Somebody was at fault there, and I mean to find out who. The old man should have been retired long ago."

"Oh, father! If he needed the work——"

"What do you know about that?" Mr. Hop-

kins said coldly. "Don't believe everything you hear, Cherry."

"But Mr. Fairbanks says——"

"Least of all what this young man says. And now, once for all, I tell you to drop this intimacy with Fairbanks," he continued, starting with his daughter toward the gate to the grounds. "I don't care to have you associate with him. Understand?"

"Oh, father!" cried Cherry, almost in tears. "Ralph has been kind to me. I am sure he has done you no harm," Ralph overheard her reply.

"Neither of your statements enters into the consideration at all. I object to your associating with this fellow."

"Why, father!"

"You have heard what I have said," said Barton Hopkins bitterly. "Fairbanks would better keep away from here. As for you, Cherry, I can make you obey me. Let him alone. Don't speak to him again."

The girl's head went up and she stared at her father proudly. Ralph had previously decided that she did not take much after her mouse-like mother. In some ways she had all the assertiveness of the supervisor himself.

"I will obey you in every way possible, father," she said softly but firmly. "But I cannot pass

Ralph on the street as though I did not know him. He is my friend. He has been kind to me. I could not treat him as you want me to."

"Then, young lady, I'll send you away where you will not be likely to cross his path. You are getting too bold and stubborn, anyway. Go in and pack your trunk. I'll see your mother. You shall start this very day for your aunt's at Selby Junction. Go into the house!"

He hustled her up the path toward the house as though she were a small child who had disobeyed him. Cherry was crying. As for Ralph, he had never before so wanted to hit a man and refrained from doing it!

"Discipline," he growled, as he moved away. "That is what he calls it. He runs his household and his family just as he tries to run the division.

"Well, sir, unless I much miss my guess, he is going to fall down, and fall down badly, on both propositions. But poor Cherry! Wish I hadn't walked this way. I got her in bad. And now he'll send her away and I'll probably never see her again," he finished, with a sigh.

CHAPTER XVIII

FROM BAD TO WORSE

RALPH refrained from telling his mother anything about this recent occurrence. He knew she would feel hurt because of what Barton Hopkins had said. She was much more likely to resent a slight put upon her son than Ralph was himself.

And, in any event, there was so much else to tell the widow regarding the happenings of the last eighteen hours that he himself quite forgot the sting that he had first felt because of Mr. Hopkins' unfair speech and ungentlemanly conduct.

But later the fact that Cherry Hopkins was to be sent away from Rockton to get her out of Ralph's way was a matter that returned again and again to the young fellow's mind. It seemed unfair, not alone to him, but to the girl herself.

And he fancied Mrs. Hopkins would be much disturbed by her husband's decision. Ralph was really sorry to be the cause of friction in the supervisor's family.

"Why, if he had spoken decently—asked me like a man! He knew I could hear all he said—meant I should—I would have promised not to speak to Cherry or approach her in any way. Of course I would! What does he think I am?"

The thought of this troubled him for several days in spite of all the other matters of serious portent which weighed upon his spirits.

For things on the division were going rapidly from bad to worse. With the shops practically closed, for as yet the Great Northern had not tried to bring in strike-breakers, the rolling stock of the division fast became crippled. There were breakdowns innumerable. Some of the freight engines were soon ready for the scrap heap. And it made a regular schedule, for freight at least, all but impossible.

The influence of other officials—not that of Barton Hopkins—kept the older maintenance of way men faithful. Most of the section hands stayed on the job. In fact the bulk of the trouble lay in the shops and yards at Rockton.

There Andy McCarrey's influence was most felt. He had some political backing, too. And the dislike for Supervisor Hopkins was more pronounced at this terminal than at the other, or along the line.

Meanwhile Ralph had continued as engineman

of the Midnight Flyer and the eastbound express from Hammerfest. That his mother was far from reconciled to this change in his work, he well knew. But she was as loyal in her way to the best interests of the Great Northern as the young fellow himself.

"If the general manager asked you to do it, Ralph, of course you could not refuse," said Mrs. Fairbanks. "But I shall never be satisfied until you are back in the train dispatcher's office. I hope for your advancement to more important positions than that of locomotive engineer."

"Plenty of time for that," said her son cheerfully. "And I know the G. M. will not forget me. It is only for a short time, we shall hope. This strike will not last forever."

But he did not tell her of the many delays and actually perilous chances of his situation. He had been accosted on the street and threatened by some of the strikers. The men who had broken away from their unions as well as from the employing railroad were desperately determined to stop every wheel on the division.

It was Andy McCarrey's boast that he would have the Great Northern on its knees in a month. It seemed that he had a large strike fund at his command. And Ralph suspected that the fellow likewise had under his control a band of rascals

who would go to any length to cripple the railroad.

Gangs of ill-favored fellows were hanging about the yards. He heard of such men, too, all along the division. Tool sheds were broken into; the section gangs' handcars were crippled; fires were set on railroad property; numberless small crimes were committed which could not be traced to the strikers themselves, but were undoubtedly committed at Andy McCarrey's behest.

"If we could just get one thing hitched to that slick rascal, we would put him where the dogs wouldn't get a chance to bite him for some time," Bob Adair said once to Ralph. "But McCarrey is as sharp as a needle. By the way, how much of that old tenement house did you see the night you and Zeph found him and Grif Falk over there?"

"Very little of it. It appeared to be practically empty. And I am sure there were no families living in it," Ralph replied.

"You are right in that," said the detective. "It is an old condemned tenement. But somehow McCarrey has got a lease of it. Nobody seems to know what goes on in there. And there is no good reason, as far as the police can find, for searching the premises.

"If I could just make sure the supply of liquor some of the men are getting is stored there, it would give us an opening. But if we do anything that can be proved illegal, McCarrey will have a case against us. He has some of the sharpest lawyers in the city in his pay."

"Did you find Whitey Malone?" asked the engineer of the Midnight Flyer reflectively.

"No. Zeph has lost trace of him. But I believe the fellow is still away from Rockton. I fancy McCarrey was afraid to trust him here. Or he has been sent along the road on some errand that has not yet come to a head. That boy, Zeph, is like a beagle on a trail, however. I hope he will mark down his man before long."

Ralph's own eyes were always open for the appearance of Whitey. By night, of course, while he sat on the bench of the big locomotive that drew the Midnight Flyer, he could not hope to see much on either side of the twin rails over which his train sped. But coming back by daylight he saw a good deal more.

The eastbound express made several stops besides those four which the Flyer made. And it was during those brief stops that Ralph picked up most of the news he got regarding the feeling of the road's employees along the division.

At Hardwell, a considerable lumbering town some miles east of Oxford and on the slope of Shadow Valley, Ralph first heard of the "bandit." He saw on the platform a man with his head bandaged surrounded by a little group of interested natives. The engineer identified the evidently wounded man as the third trick operator and signalman at this station.

He could not leave his engine, of course, but the operator knew Ralph and came down the platform to speak to him.

"I got a nasty smash on the head this morning," he explained. "I don't know who the rascal was, but he got a hundred and forty dollars of the road's money and my watch and stickpin."

"How came you to let him do that, Fiske?" Ralph asked, but with some sympathy.

"I was setting the signals for your own train, Fairbanks, the Midnight Flyer. I didn't hear the fellow come in, but just as I turned from the levers I found him there behind me. Sure I had a gun! But it was in the desk drawer. We haven't had a hold-up around here for years. He hit me on the head with the butt of his gun and I went down and out. When I came to he had lit out with my junk and the company's money."

"That is too bad," said Ralph, as he caught

sight of the conductor's raised arm. "What kind of looking fellow was he?"

"Don't know. He had a flour bag over his head. Tall, husky fellow. That is all I know about it. The super is giving me rats over the wire."

"He would," called out Ralph, as he let the steam into the cylinders and the train began to move.

"Now, I wonder," thought the young engineer, "if Whitey Malone had anything to do with that. Or is the bandit a free-lance with no connection with these strikers? Humph! Where is Zeph, I wonder?"

When Zeph next appeared it was in an astonishing way. Neither Ralph nor his queer friend was likely to forget the occasion.

CHAPTER XIX

THE HOLD-UP IN SHADOW VALLEY

As THE days slowly passed Ralph Fairbanks became very curious on one particular point. And this was something quite aside from his activities on the road or the strike developments.

He wondered if Cherry Hopkins had been sent away from home as her father had threatened.

The young fellow never went through the street where Mr. Hopkins lived on his way to and from his home. He would not appear to be curious regarding the girl. He did not want to attract her father's attention and create more trouble for Cherry, if the latter was still in Rockton.

He thought highly of the young girl. As his mother had intimated, he had never paid much attention to any particular girl before.

"How is your friend, Cherry Hopkins?" the widow sometimes asked him.

"Got too much to do now to think of girls," he would return, with a laugh.

But perhaps neither his tone nor his laugh quite convinced Mrs. Fairbanks that all was right. She asked shrewdly on one occasion:

"Have you seen Miss Cherry lately?"

"Not for a week. I believe she expected to go away. I don't know whether she has or has not gone."

"Would you like to know, Ralph?" asked his mother softly.

At that the young fellow awoke to the discovery that his mother was looking at him queerly.

"Why, Mother!" he exclaimed, "you don't suppose I care particularly about any of the Hopkins family?"

"I think you do about Cherry," she returned. "And from what I have heard about her, she is well worth your caring for—in a friendly way, I mean."

"My goodness! what is all this?" asked the wondering Ralph.

His mother smiled and shook her head at him.

"You must not think that you can hide anything from me," she said. "There is a little bird comes and tells me——"

"Hoh!" cried Ralph, interrupting. "There are a lot of those 'little birds.' And I bet they all belong to the St. Mark's Sewing Guild. Yes,

sir! What has Gossip's tongue been saying now?"

"Gossip can be kind as well as cruel. After all, Ralph, gossip is the most interesting thing in the world. Newspapers and magazines and books are full of it. Just gossip. And what I heard about you was anything but unkind, although it did not sound good for Mr. Hopkins."

His mother went on to relate what she had heard from an eyewitness of the occurrence when the supervisor had forbidden his daughter to speak to Ralph, and then had promised to send her away from home because of her defiance.

"She is a girl who would make any boy a faithful friend. I admire her very much, although I have never seen her," Mrs. Fairbanks said. "And I wonder at that man, Mr. Hopkins, Ralph, for picking on you the way he does. I cannot understand it."

"Unfortunately," her son told her, "I have unintentionally occasioned Mr. Hopkins some ruffling of the temper. And, believe me, his temper is easy to ruffle. Well, I am sorry if Cherry was sent away because of me. It's so foolish."

"Yes, I am told she has gone," said his mother. "To Shelby Junction. Of course, you never go as far away from Rockton as that?"

"Not likely," replied Ralph, laughing to hide

a good bit of his disappointment. "Nobody but the strikers is taking a vacation on this division of the Great Northern."

The number of strikers increased daily. News came from points all along the division that little bunches of workmen in various departments had thrown down their tools and joined the strikers. Hopkins was strongly in favor of hiring men in the East and bringing them out to take the strikers' places, especially in the shops. And perhaps he was right in this desire, for the locomotives and other rolling stock were fast becoming decrepit.

Ralph, like most of the old-timers driving the engines, saw to it that his toolbox was well fitted and he carried spare valves and cocks and such small articles against chance trouble. It was not against the rules for a locomotive engineer to tinker with his huge charge if it broke down anywhere on the run.

When they came back to Rockton each day, however, Ralph and his two firemen went over the mechanism of the big eight-wheeler with meticulous care. The firemen took example of their chief and watched for small faults and possible breakdowns, like two cats at a mousehole.

Whenever the Midnight Flyer or the return eastbound express halted, down jumped the fire-

men with their long nosed oilcans and squirted the lubricant into every nook and cranny they could get at. The roundhouse foreman sputtered like a wet firecracker about Ralph's demands on him for oil.

"Better be oil than brasswork and steel," said the young engineer. "Don't forget that, Mike."

"I don't forget nothin'," grumbled Mike. "But the super is watchin' the out-put of lubricatin' oil. He has an idee we feed it to the cats and grease the turntables with it. He sees a chance of savin' the Great Northern two cents' worth of oil in the course of a year. Huh!"

"Well, I am not going to buy the oil myself," Ralph rejoined, with conviction. "And we don't carry a greaser's slushpot on the Midnight Flyer."

"Sure, are the wheelboxes heatin' on you?" asked the foreman.

"I think they need repacking. But, of course, there isn't time between runs to do all that. Is there another locomotive I could use to pull the Flyer with?"

"You know there isn't. Not a bull in the stable, anyway, could make the time you are getting out of that mill. Two-o-two would be an hour late at Hammerfest."

"Don't tell me that!" gasped Ralph. "I am having a hard enough time as it is. Guess I'll

have to coax this one along until they can send you a Class-A locomotive over from the main."

"And when will that be, I dunno," muttered the pessimistic foreman.

So Ralph was pulling out of the Rockton terminal every night with a sort of sick feeling at the pit of his stomach. He said nothing to anybody about this nervous apprehension—not even to his mother. It seemed unmanly, he thought. He never knew before that he was a coward!

That is what he called it, cowardice. But it was not. It was the effect of increased responsibility on his mind. The threat of some terrible accident to the train he pulled was always hanging over him.

Strikers and their sympathizers now gathered about the crossings at midnight when the Flyer pulled out and booed and threatened the train crew. It was spread broadcast in the labor journals that something was likely to happen to the crippled engines pulling the division trains.

Passengers were warned by big posters to refrain from traveling by this division of the Great Northern in particular, because the strike of shopmen and maintenance of way men made it impossible for the trains to be run safely and on time.

But Barton Hopkins was by no means a fool.

He gave an interview to the reporters of the fair-minded journals in which he showed by schedule that the passenger trains, at least, over the division, were ordinarily on time. He even took advantage of Ralph Fairbanks' governing the engine pulling the Midnight Flyer to prove that that important train had kept closer to the schedule since the beginning of the strike than ever before.

This statement to the press angered the strikers more than anything that Hopkins had done. Its truth hurt their cause. When Ralph pulled the Flyer out of the yards that night, at Hammerby Street the cab was assailed with stones and rotten vegetables from a gang of hoodlums, of course egged on my McCarrey.

"Scab! Scab!" these fellows yelled as the broken glass tinkled about the ears of the engineer and his two firemen.

"Jim Perkins ought to be big enough to stop that," urged one of the firemen. "They say he still holds his job in the old union but has spoken at the meetings in Beeman Hall.

"There is a bunch of fellows helping him stir up trouble, too," observed his mate. "Billy Lyons and Sam Peters and some others. But they all keep their cards in the old union. Something rotten—something rotten, boy, believe me!"

This suspicion that the small unions were playing an underhanded game—or that officers of those unions were doing so—kept many of the wiser employees of the Great Northern in line.

Ralph secretly told himself that that fusillade of rotten vegetables and stones aimed at his firemen and himself in the cabin of the big locomotive that pulled the Midnight Flyer cured both of the firemen of any suspicion of sympathy with the men who had struck and their supporters.

But, after all, Ralph would have felt safer if there had been guards riding on the train and on the locomotive, as there had been in war times when he helped get the soldiers through to the embarkation port. Mr. Adair, however, did not believe in a show of force. He had men in plain clothes unobtrusively distributed along the division; but they could not be discovered from the passengers save by those who had inside information.

Coming down the hill beyond Shadow Valley Station on this very morning that the Midnight Flyer engine crew had been bombarded, Ralph chanced to be thinking of Zeph. It was a black hour; there was not a star visible. The locomotive was steaming well. She was going so fast, in fact, that if there had been any obstruction on the straight track it is doubtful if the

headlight would have picked it out in time for Ralph to have stopped the heavy train.

But he had to take that chance to make the schedule. He knew the track walkers of this section were all true and tried men. Under ordinary circumstances and conditions, the inspection of this piece of track had been made within half an hour.

Ralph sat with his hand on the throttle. He could shut off, without reversing, and set the brakes with two swift motions in five seconds. The brakes were really dragging a bit on the wheels, for the curve was near and he must ease the engine around that.

No startling figure appeared this night on the bowlder beside the right of way. Ralph needed no heart-stimulant, his pulse throbbed just a little rapidly. He almost held his breath as he shut down the throttle and the headlight flashed off the rails as the heavy engine approached the turn.

This was the dangerous spot. For several moments the light did not reveal the ribbons of steel very far ahead. Behind that turn wreck and disaster might lie!

And yet, the young engineer dared not creep around it. To lose time on this important run

meant much to the Great Northern. He must keep on——

The head of the locomotive swerved and the light caught the two rails again at a distance. The great white ray of the lamp shot into the tunnel of blackness under the trees.

And then, as one of the watching firemen sang out from the other side of the cab, Ralph grabbed the reverse lever and threw it down in the corner. He could not stop for easing her off. He slapped on the brakes. Fire flashed from the coach wheels and a grinding and bumping told of the damage being done because of this vicious stop.

The occasion called for such drastic measures, however. The Midnight Flyer was held up. What it meant, Ralph did not know, but in the middle of the westbound track stood a man's figure outlined by fire!

Had he not pulled down the heavy train as he had, the locomotive would have collided with the flaming object.

CHAPTER XX

STRANGE SIGNALS

THE pilot of the great engine was within six feet of the flaming figure when the train was stopped. And Ralph knew, and unhappily, that several of the coach wheels were so badly flattened by the pressure of the brakes that they would have to go to the shops to be replaned.

This thought was back in his head, however. First and foremost he wanted to know what this was ahead—this strange signal that had caused him to bring the Flyer to such an abrupt stop.

One of the firemen leaped to the cinder path and ran ahead. In a moment he turned and waved his arms madly.

"It's a scarecrow! I believe it came out of yonder cornfield. A scarecrow all afire!"

He kicked the blazing figure and it fell over. the straw contents of the old coat and trousers flaring up into a more vivid flame.

"Somebody has played a joke on us," shouted the other fireman. "And a pretty poor joke, at that."

"Maybe it is no joke," was Ralph's comment. "Stilling, you go forward with a lantern. If all's clear at the next curve give us a high-ball. There may be something more than a joke in this mysterious affair. Hurry up, now!"

Stilling ran ahead. The conductor came forward, worried about the delay. The violent stopping of the train had awakened many of the passengers and the Pullmans, he said, were buzzing.

"Let 'em buzz," replied Ralph carelessly.

Stilling's lantern flitted on like a firefly's light. Ralph's gaze was fixed upon it. He hoped to see the sign given by the lamp that the way was clear.

But when Stilling reached the long curve that began nearly an eighth of a mile beyond the point where the Flyer had been brought to a stop, he halted—they could see that by the motion of the lantern—and then went on slowly. By and by he signaled:

"Come ahead—slow."

There was something wrong. The conductor knew this as well as the young engineer. The former's lantern signaled a question back to his flagman. The latter brought in his lantern from the other curve, signaled "All aboard!" and Ralph started forward.

There was just slant enough to the roadbed

here to make it necessary for the engineer to keep some pressure of brakes on the wheels. The heavy train slid down to the place where Stilling had stopped.

When the train again came to a halt the headlight did not show the rails for more than ten yards. But it picked out the beginning of a short trestle by which the rails were carried over a deep ravine.

Stilling walked back beside the huge boiler of the locomotive and spoke no word until he was directly under Ralph's window. He was pale. His lips writhed before he could speak, and what he said was in a voice so husky that the listeners could scarcely understand him.

"One pillar's been blown out—blown to pieces. The rails are sagging—have to be braced before anything can get over. Great guns! if we'd come down here at the usual speed, the old mill and every wagon in the string would have been piled in a heap down there in the Devil's Den!"

"By gum!" exclaimed the other fireman. "I thought I got some sound like an explosion as we came down the hill. The dynamite must have gone off only a few minutes ago."

"That burning scarecrow saved all our lives," muttered Ralph. *"Who did that?"*

"If there are ghouls around trying to wreck

the train, and there are, then there are likewise watchers who defended us from harm. We have somebody to thank," said the conductor.

There was no more comment on this mysterious thing by the train and engine crew for some time thereafter. There was too much else to do. Somebody had to go forward to the nearest station and telegraph for wrecking crew and other help.

A terrible disaster had barely been averted. The passengers aboard the Midnight Flyer on this occasion would not be likely soon to forget the incident. Stilling had not overstated the horror that had been averted.

The wires certainly buzzed now, up and down the division. The express was delayed fully two hours, although the wrecking train was brought down from Oxford in record time. The freights began to pile up on both tracks. If this dastardly attempt to wreck the Midnight Flyer was the act of the strikers, they had come near to doing what Andy McCarrey threatened. The division might have been tied up for a couple of days if Ralph's train had plunged into the Devil's Den.

Some of the crew looked into the matter of the burning scarecrow that had so luckily warned the engine crew of trouble ahead. The straw-stuffed figure had been taken from a small field

of corn bordering the right of way. The owner of the field lived at some distance, but he came over to see what had happened.

"I was woke up by that big explosion," he declared. "I thought it was a blast in the quarry. Quarry is ten miles away, though. And then I began to wonder why they were blasting at night. So I got up and looked out, and saw the lights of the train and knew something had happened, because it was standing still. So I came over."

As it chanced, Ralph heard him and he asked the farmer:

"Have you seen any suspicious persons around here lately?"

"Don't know as I did. There's been a young feller come to my place off and on for a week or more. But he ain't what you'd call suspicious. He bought eggs and potatoes and such, and paid for 'em with good money. He didn't look bad enough to want to ditch a train. No, sir."

There were too many people around for Ralph to describe Zeph Dallas to this man and try to find out if the fellow he spoke of was his friend. Yet he could not help believing that Zeph was still in this vicinity and that he had taken the desperate chance of stopping the Midnight Flyer with the burning scarecrow. Yet, if this was so, why

had Zeph not remained to see if his strange signal set against the train had done its work of warning?

"Odd enough," thought Ralph. "Odd enough to have emanated from Zeph's brain, that is sure. But where did Zeph go, if so, and why?"

In any event, Zeph did not show up at the place before the trestle was braced and the express moved on. Ralph got his belated train to Hammerfest, the end of the run, two hours late. He had to start back almost immediately with the forenoon express that was supposed to reach Rockton at half past eleven.

When this train reached the scene of the early morning excitement Ralph had to ease her along very slowly. The first repairs on the trestle were by no means permanent.

By daylight he could see, from the cab window, the entire scene of what had come so near being an awful catastrophe. On the south side of the right of way at this point was a towering crag. It was covered by scrub growth that masked the rocks, but the young engineer had once climbed that rock and knew that there was more than one path to the top.

As he looked upward he saw, caught upon a bush some yards above the level of the railroad, a garment fluttering in the breeze. He was posi-

tive, after a moment, that it was a vest—a discarded vest.

"Some hobo has left part of his outfit," thought Ralph.

But then, as he raised his eyes higher, he saw another strange signal fluttering from a bush. It was a shirt. He could see the sleeves of it, and it fluttered grotesquely.

"Why?" the young engineer muttered.

He looked farther up the steep wall and saw a cap! Something about that cap astonished him even more than the other fluttering articles of wearing apparel. Distant as it was, Ralph thought he recognized that cap. It was of a mustard color, an odd color, and he remembered that the night he had had his last adventure with Zeph Dallas in Rockton Zeph had worn just that sort of cap!

Then he got the signal to go ahead, and could do nothing at the moment to investigate these matters. He pulled up the hill toward Shadow Valley Station.

CHAPTER XXI

ABOUT CHERRY

THE first thing Ralph did on his arrival at Rockton after that momentous round trip to and from Hammerfest, was to look up Bob Adair. He knew where to find the chief detective now; or, at least, who to ask about him without disturbing Supervisor Hopkins.

He reached the detective at last. Of course Mr. Adair had heard all about the dynamiting of the trestle pillar at Devil's Den. He had sent a man to make a special report on the terrible affair. But he had not heard from Dallas and he was worried.

"The boy's in trouble. That is what is the matter. What you tell me, Ralph, bears out my suspicion."

"I bet he set up that scarcrow and fired it to stop the Flyer," the engineer of that fast train observed.

"Granted. He must have been watching in that vicinity. But the trestle wreckers were too

smart for him. The charge was exploded and the trestle wrecked. He had not time to go to the nearest telegraph station, so he set the fire instead. But what became of him then?"

"I fear something bad has happened to him," was the answer.

"Great Scott! something is always happening to Zeph," observed Mr. Adair.

"I know. But it must have been something serious for him to discard his cap and vest and even his outer shirt. For I believe all those things hung on the bushes up there on the crag belonged to Zeph."

"Perhaps he hung them there before the pillar was blown out."

"But what for? I don't get it at all," cried Ralph. "Queer as Zeph is, he isn't crazy. Not at all! He had a reason for making signals to somebody, and that shirt et cetera are signals."

"See to-morrow when you go by if they are still there," suggested Mr. Adair. "Meanwhile I will have my men beat the bushes for him around there. I will have that farmer you speak of interviewed."

"But if anything bad has really happened to Zeph, it will be too late," sighed Ralph as he turned away and started homeward.

He could not take Mr. Adair's easy view of the mystery. Ralph had a fondness for Zeph. He could not forget the many times the odd fellow had helped him or been associated with him in dangerous adventure.

And now, it seemed to Ralph, Zeph Dallas must himself need help or he would not have shed his garments on the side of that crag overhanging the Devil's Den. Ralph greatly desired to look into the matter.

Yet, he could not do that. The general manager had put him on his honor when he gave him the Midnight Flyer run. Ralph could not desert that duty even to aid a friend.

He heard about another person in trouble when he arrived at home. His mother was full of it.

"Did you hear that Mrs. Hopkins was very ill, Ralph?" the widow asked, almost at once when he entered the cottage.

"I'd be ill if I were that man's relative," grumbled the young engineer. "What is the matter with her?"

"It seems to be a long-standing trouble the doctor has been treating her for, and now she must go under an operation. Actually, they say she is wearing her heart out because Cherry is

away from her and at Shelby Junction. She has never been separated from her before so she tells Mrs. Wagner. That man is awful!"

"He is getting worse around the yards," said Ralph. "I just heard he accuses one of the section foremen of letting the strikers steal dynamite so that they could blow up that trestle."

Mrs. Fairbanks had heard of that; but she had no idea her son's life had been in danger. And Ralph was not telling her too much. He was glad she switched to Mrs. Hopkins' illness again.

"If Cherry is not allowed to come home, I fear her mother will never come through the operation alive," said the widow. "Mrs. Wagner says the doctor declares Hopkins the hardest man to move from a decision he ever knew. He calls it 'mental delinquency' on the supervisor's part. He says," and Mrs. Fairbanks smiled, "if Hopkins had been spanked at the right time when he was a boy, and spanked enough, he would not have got the 'self-importance complex' and become such a nuisance to his fellowmen."

"That medico knows his business!" laughed Ralph. "Ain't it the truth? as Zeph would say. And that reminds me, Mother. I fear Zeph is in some trouble down the line. Mr. Adair does not know what has become of him."

"That boy is always getting into some difficulty," said the widow. "I would not worry about him, if I were you, Ralph."

That day passed without any particular outbreak by the strikers in Rockton. The police and railroad detectives had the situation pretty well in hand about the terminal and the city yards.

Mr. Hopkins had taken the bit in his teeth regarding the attempted wrecking of the Midnight Flyer in Shadow Valley. One of the section foremen near the trestle had obtained some dynamite for a specific purpose, and the supervisor had jumped to the conclusion that this foreman had given up the explosive to the strikers.

This unproved assertion provoked more trouble on the entire length of the division. The section foreman had complained to his union. The full quantity of dynamite was promptly found in his possession, and inside of ten hours the union officials had demanded that Mr. Hopkins retract his accusation.

"Now, why don't they ask a hungry bulldog to give up a bone?" Ralph observed, when he read this in the evening paper before leaving home for his night run to Hammerfest. "Those fellows are as bad as the super himself. He never handles anybody with gloves; but you can't handle

him without having your own hands muffled. And those union leaders ought to know it."

Ralph kissed his mother warmly at the door and started off for the station, swinging his heavy lunch can. Mrs. Fairbanks never overlooked the fact that a railroader is always hungry. And Ralph hated restaurant food. He carried enough for a bite on the engine as well as a hearty breakfast at the far end of his run.

He did not go down to the roundhouse himself, but trusted to his firemen to back the locomotive on to the westbound track and into the train-shed. As he stood in his overalls and with his coat and lunch kit near the open window of the telegraph room, he heard Mr. Barton Hopkins' voice inside.

"Anything on, Silsby?" asked the supervisor, in his sharp, quick way.

"No, Mr. Hopkins," returned the night operative.

"Rush this, then," ordered the supervisor and then Ralph heard his quick step going out of the room.

The operative, Silsby, turned immediately to his key. Ralph heard him call Shelby Junction and repeat the call until he got an answer. Then he sent the following, Ralph reading the Morse easily as Silsby tapped it out:

"MISS C. HOPKINS,
"22 Horatio Street,
"Shelby Junction.
"Your mother ill. Old trouble, but serious. Come home at once.
"(Signed) B. HOPKINS."

There was the repeat back from the Shelby Junction operator, and then Silsby gave the "O. K." and closed his key. Ralph, waiting for the backing in of the big eight-wheeler for Number 202, wondered if Mr. Hopkins was, after all, as case-hardened and hard-crusted as he appeared to be.

The supervisor was having domestic trouble. Perhaps he loved his mouse-like little wife, and his daughter, as well. These family troubles might be one present cause of the supervisor's caustic remarks and his uncompromising attitude in railroad affairs.

"I was telling the G. M. the officials did not look at things from the men's standpoint," considered Ralph. "Perhaps the men ought to see things from the supervisor's standpoint, too."

CHAPTER XXII

THE THREAT DIRECT

HAD Ralph Fairbanks not been standing just outside the telegraph office window he would not have obtained a certain bit of information which proved, later, to be most important.

He had heard the operator send Mr. Hopkins' wire to his daughter, and he knew very well that the girl would quickly respond to his and her mother's need. But Ralph was not at all expecting such a seemingly prompt response as followed.

The big illuminated clock in the train shed now pointed to a quarter to twelve. The long string of cars belonging to the Midnight Flyer had been backed in some time before and the gates had been opened for the passengers to swarm aboard. The berths were all made up, of course, and the passengers immediately went to bed.

The young engineer, standing there idly, had his mind fixed upon the Hopkins' troubles. How shocked Cherry would be to learn of her mother's serious condition! It was true, as Ralph's mother

had said, never before had her son thought so much of any girl as he did of Cherry Hopkins.

Suddenly he heard the Rockton call on the telegraph sounder. It was rapped out a dozen times before Silsby, the operator, got to the key.

"I, I, Rok," was the notification Silsby gave impatiently.

"Night letter for Super Hop. Overlooked. Shoot it," came the reply, as plain to Ralph's ear as it was to Silsby's.

"Oh, boy!" retorted the Rockton operator. "You're all set for trouble. I'll try to smooth it. Go!"

Instantly the sounder began to click again and the Morse flowed smoothly to the listening engineer's ears:

"B. Hop., Super,
"Rockton.

"Got mother's letter. Know she is ill. Am starting to-night on 10:40. Con. will pass me on your book. Tell mother I am coming.

"(Signed) C. Hopkins."

It was odd, but the first thought Ralph Fairbanks had on overhearing this delayed message of Cherry Hopkins to her father was that the Mid-

night Flyer would pass the 10:40 from Shelby Junction in Shadow Valley not far from the Devil's Den.

This message that had been delayed by some oversight should have reached the supervisor before he telegraphed to his daughter to come home. Cherry had evidently read between the lines of her mother's letter and determined to rejoin Mrs. Hopkins, whether her father approved or not.

"Plucky girl!" thought Ralph. "She's one person who doesn't cower before the Great I Am. And she is already on the iron, coming home, as she thinks, without her father's approval. Well, I guess the Hopkins will have to fight their family battles without any aid from me."

Ralph started for the edge of the platform, for he saw the rear of the locomotive backing in. Stilling held the throttle. This fireman would soon apply for an engineer's job. He handled the huge machine like a veteran, and when the coupling was made the passengers already in their berths aboard the train scarcely knew it, save for the long sigh of the compressed air.

Ralph stepped aboard while the firemen made the connections. As usual he put his can under the seat on the driver's side. As he stooped to

do this, he saw something white fluttering in the draught.

It was a folded paper hung upon a nail under the seat. He could not have missed seeing it when he set the luncheon kit down on the floor. He picked up the paper and stood up. He unfolded it in the light of his target lamp. Written boldly across the sheet were these words:

> "FAIRBANKS:—You're due for a bump to-night. If you like yourself, stay off the Midnight Flyer."

This threatening screed was unsigned. And yet, as Ralph stared at it, he somehow felt that he had seen the careless writing before.

Who was this who seemed to be warning him, as well as threatening him? Was it a fake, or in earnest? Were the strikers or their friends trying to frighten him? Or did somebody who really felt kindly toward the young engineer believe that he should be warned of a real danger?

And where had he seen that handwriting before?

This last question seemed as important as the others. After the blowing out of the trestle pillar at the Devil's Den, Ralph could easily be-

lieve that Andy McCarrey's crowd would attempt other wicked designs against the peace and safety of the road and its loyal employees.

That the malcontents were making a grave mistake was undoubtedly a fact. The outrage at Devil's Den and further attempts to wreck trains on the division would arouse the antagonism of the Brotherhoods instead of bringing their membership into line, as McCarrey had hoped. Such attempts threatened the lives of the train crews. Engineers and firemen and conductors and brakemen could not be frightened into aiding McCarrey in his wildcat strike. That went without saying.

Ralph had very little time to decide what he should do about this paper that he had found under his bench. He glanced up at the clock. Three minutes of midnight!

But as his gaze fell to the platform again he saw the tall figure of Mr. Adair hurrying along beside the train. Ralph leaned farther out of the window and beckoned him.

"What do you want, Ralph?" asked the chief detective hastily, as he leaped up the steps of the locomotive. "I have just heard——"

"And I've just found *this*." The young engineer told him where. "And I believe I've seen that writing before."

"Whose is it?" demanded Adair the instant he had scanned the warning words.

Ralph leaned closer to his ear and whispered a name. Adair started. "No?" he cried. "Do you believe that?"

"Compare it with that paper Zeph gave you," urged Ralph.

The gong sounded. The young engineer's hand went to the throttle. The conductor shouted "All aboard!"

"Keep your eyes open, Ralph," advised the chief detective, swinging himself down. "That is no idle threat. I am going to keep the wires hot ahead of the Midnight Flyer to-night. Never mind if you smash your schedule all to flinders. Safety first, my boy."

"That is not the super's motto," said Ralph, rather sharply. "'Get her through,' is what he wants."

"You should worry!" exclaimed Adair as the great drivers began to turn. "The G. M. is behind you. I am having the whole division watched. I'll jack the boys up right now. But if anything happens——"

His voice trailed off into silence. At least it was drowned by the exhaust. The express rumbled out from under the train shed and Ralph eased her through the yards.

"Due for a bump to-night." If that warning was serious, it was well worth Ralph Fairbanks' attention.

"But the fellow doesn't intimate where the bump is coming. Humph! Perhaps he doesn't know. I bet that Andy McCarrey, if he has planned to hold up this train again, is not telling many people about it.

"Just those who do his wicked work. And who are *they?* Is Whitey Malone down there in Shadow Valley yet? Is it he whom Zeph is watching? Did he set off the dynamite that blew out that pillar?

"My goodness! I could ask a hundred questions along this line and get the same answer to all. Nothing! Well——"

The train left the outskirts of Rockton without any trouble. It ran smoothly over the well-ballasted track. The engineer and firemen gazed ahead keenly. All were on the alert for trouble, but Ralph did not tell his firemen of the warning he had received.

"Why worry them?" he thought. "It's bad enough that I should feel as though a sword were hanging over me."

CHAPTER XXIII

WHAT LIES AHEAD?

WHETHER it was wise or not, Ralph Fairbanks kept this special suspense to himself. In truth, while a fast train like the Midnight Flyer is under headway, the crew on the locomotive have little time for conversation.

The atmosphere in the cabin of such an engine as this great eight-wheeler drawing the express was tense enough all the way. There were but four let-ups in this mental strain which was felt by the firemen, as well as by the engineer. The Flyer pulled down to a stop at four stations before reaching the end of the run at Hammerfest. At these stops only, could the men on the locomotive talk with comfort.

More keenly than ever on this run did Ralph watch for signals. With raised hands he and the fireman at the other side of the cab signaled to each other the nature of the switch targets and semaphore lights as they picked them up.

And now and then, at some dangerous crossing or lonely, empty station, the young engineer

caught the secret signal of Mr. Adair's police—the double flash of an electric torch from the bushes or some other hiding place. The chief detective's operatives were on hand and faithful to their trust.

This fact reminded Ralph the more keenly of Zeph Dallas. What was he doing? Indeed, where was he and what was his situation on this night when so much seemed at stake?

Fryburg was the first stop. The Midnight Flyer drew in there without a thing having been observed suggesting the nature of the threat of which Ralph had been warned in the paper he had found under his bench.

The night operator at this station ran out and along the side of the train to the locomotive. He reached up a message to Ralph and gave another to the conductor. Under the light near his shoulder Ralph read the following:

"FAIRBANKS, ENGINEMAN, TRAIN 202:—
Speed up. Fire reported in timber Shadow Valley near tracks.

"HOPKINS, Super."

"That is what it is, then," said the telegraph operator. "I heard an hour ago that the sky was red over that way. But there has been no

report come in from Shadow Valley Station."

"Reckon the op. can't see it there any better than you can," said Ralph. "You know the station is on this slope of the ridge."

"I like that 'speed up,'" growled Stilling, who had read the message over Ralph's shoulder. "Wonder what the Great I Am thinks we are?"

"He knows we're on time, anyway," said the conductor, and started back along the coaches, calling "All Aboard!"

Ralph, as he eased his locomotive into smooth action, considered the difficulty ahead of him. It was more than a matter of keeping to schedule. That was important enough. He confessed to himself now that he thoroughly disliked Mr. Hopkins; but much as he disliked the supervisor, he realized that this wire was worthy of consideration.

If the forest fire reached the right of way before the Flyer could descend into Shadow Valley, the train of varnished cars might not get through at all. Taking a chance with a freight train in a burning area of timber, as Ralph had actually done in the past, was an entirely different matter from plunging into a conflagration with Pullman coaches.

Besides, the smoke and flames might cloud the vision of the engine crew so that they could

not see clearly the right of way. An obstacle placed on the rails by the strikers, who might be the cause of the fire itself, could derail the big locomotive in the middle of the burning woods and place the crew of the train and the passengers in great peril.

Ralph could not fail to remember the strange warning he had received before leaving Rockton. If he was "due for a bump" it might be that the locality of the attempted wreck was in the midst of the fire.

Shadow Valley offered every opportunity for the rascals who were fighting the Great Northern to carry out a hold-up or cause a serious wreck. The lower plain of the valley was a wild country of both field and forest. There were few farmsteads, and those mostly of squatters who had broken ground in small patches.

Hanging above the right of way of the railroad, as at Devil's Den, were lofty crags, wooded for the most part, and offering plenty of hideouts for outlaws and tramps in general.

Ralph remembered the recent bandit scare at Hardwell. The fellow with the flour sack over his head, of whom Fiske, the telegraph operator, had told the engineer, was a person to consider at this time.

That bandit might be a free lance outlaw or he

might be working with Andy McCarrey and his gang of trouble-makers. Almost, Ralph was convinced, Zeph Dallas must know about that outlaw. Did the same fellow dynamite the trestle pillar at Devil's Den?

"My gracious! how I'd like to get off this run and take a hand in dealing with these scoundrels myself," groaned Ralph. "I'd like to find Zeph and learn what he knows. I just ache to get into the fight!"

He was in peril enough. He knew that, of course. On every foot of the way ahead lay uncertainty. But his work now was passive. He craved action. He desired greatly to know what lay ahead. The situation was fraught with so much uncertainty that Ralph Fairbanks was in keen expectation of momentary disaster.

It was a star-lit night; but with the approach of the false dawn a misty curtain was drawn across the sky. The zenith looked as though it were covered with a vast milky way. On the earth, even where open fields bordered the tracks, the shadows became denser.

Too-hoo! Hoo! shrieked the whistle of the Midnight Flyer.

Those passengers sleeping so comfortably in their berths had no thought for the anxiety that tugged at the heart of the young engineer in the

locomotive cab. Ralph hung out of the cab window as the pilot struck a short curve, and tried to catch a glimpse of the right of way ahead of the focal point of the headlight.

He saw the flash on the instant that the fireman pulled the whistle cord again—a long flash, then two short ones. It was the signal agreed upon by Bob Adair and his operatives to pull down any train they wished to board.

Ralph had not expected that the Midnight Flyer would be stopped on any pretext. He was all but willing to fly by without paying attention to the signal. Then memory of the warning he had received came to his mind and he shut off the power on the huge locomotive. He applied the brakes gently. The long train eased to almost a standstill.

Out of the brush beside the way popped a figure in a long coat. The man leaped the ditch and boarded the locomotive steps. Instantly Ralph threw off the brakes and opened the throttle. The man sagged into the seat behind the young engineer. The latter could hear the breath sobbing in the fellow's throat. He glanced back at him and recognized one of Adair's old operatives, Frank Haley.

"What under the sun's the matter, Haley?"

shouted Ralph, so that his companion might hear, for the wheels were drumming again.

"I'm not sure. I was back on the road at a house, telephoning, when the girl on the switchboard at Shadow Valley began to broadcast something that I got. I dropped the receiver and beat it so as to catch you."

"What is the matter?" repeated Ralph anxiously.

"There's been a wreck—a bad one."

"Where?"

"Down in the valley."

"Why, there's a fire there, too!"

"Yes. And the fire guard is out already to try to put it out. But this is something else. A train has been derailed, and the girl says all railroad dicks are supposed to get down there in a hurry. That is why I took the chance of stopping the Midnight Flyer," concluded Haley.

CHAPTER XXIV

TERRIBLE NEWS

"WHAT train is off the iron?" asked Ralph quickly. "Anything ahead of us? Will we be held up?"

That was his first consideration. To think of the Flyer's schedule as being of the first importance had become an obsession with him.

"I didn't get any details," said Haley, over the engineer's shoulder. "I don't even know whether the wreck is this side or the other side of the burning woods. But somehow I've got to get there. Adair's orders."

"Let's see," ruminated Ralph, "there is Sixty-four that takes the siding at Cole's Station to let us pass. Hold on! She hasn't much more than left Shadow Valley. The only other west-bound train in our way right now is the passenger accommodation that pulls into Oxford just ahead of us. Number Fifty-two. Think it may be her, Haley?"

Haley had caught most of what the engineer said. He shook his head.

"The wreck may be on the eastbound track," he observed.

"You're right at that!" exclaimed Ralph. "We pass Number Thirty-three, eastbound passenger, this side of the Devil's Den. Where would she be about now? Let's see."

Without looking at the printed schedule which every trainman carries, Ralph figured out from his memory of the train dispatcher's orders which he had himself formulated the locality of Number 33 if it was on time.

"That Thirty-three comes clear from the Junction, doesn't she?" asked Haley, over Ralph's shoulder.

"Yes. She leaves Shelby Junction at ten-forty——"

The young fellow halted in his speech. A new thought stabbed him to the quick. Cherry Hopkins had telegraphed her father that she was leaving Shelby Junction at that hour. If anything had happened to Number 33 this girl was aboard it!

He said nothing more to Haley, but gave his strict attention to the running of the train. But the specter of the wreck ahead took on a grimmer cast in Ralph Fairbanks' mind.

If there was any way of coaxing more speed out of the big locomotive, the engineer put it to

the test now. The run between Fryburg and Shadow Valley Station was not a long one, at best. He had lost two minutes in shutting down to let Frank Haley aboard. Ralph recovered those two minutes and steamed into the next stop with another minute to spare.

Early morning though it was, the station platform was thronged. Ahead, as Ralph and his crew could now see, the sky was blood red. The forest fire must be of great consequence and burning a big area in the Shadow Valley basin.

The fire had called the curious together at the railroad; but news of the wreck on the far side of the valley was likewise rife. The station agent himself was on hand and brought the engineer and conductor the messages. They read:

"Speed up to get ahead of fire in Shadow Valley."

"Wreck of 33 between Hardwell and Timber Brook. Reported spread across right of way."

The second message struck Ralph to the heart. He had feared it. Poor Cherry! He felt that she might be seriously injured, or even dead.

When he saw doctors, nurses, and a hospital

outfit getting aboard one of the Pullmans he was more than convinced that the wreck had been a terrible catastrophe.

"If those strikers did it, it will break the back of the strike," declared Haley, with confidence.

Ralph felt no interest in the strike just then. He was visualizing Cherry Hopkins' pretty figure writhing in a tangle of flaming wood and scorching iron.

If Cherry was killed or disfigured, her mother surely would die. Supervisor Hopkins might lose all his family at one blow! Ralph found himself considering the supervisor's case with a feeling of sympathy which he had never supposed he would have for the crotchety railroad official.

There were several railroad detectives riding on the locomotive when Number 202 pulled out of Shadow Valley Station; but they talked among themselves. The crew of the locomotive had too much to do right then to engage in any conversation.

Ralph hung out of his window, watching the ribbons of steel ahead of the pilot. Where the track was straight, the mild glare of the headlight glistened along the rails for yards upon yards. He could mark every joint of the steel rods.

At times he glanced skyward. That angry

glare quenched such light as remained of the misted stars. The train mounted the remainder of the grade and then took the straight pitch down to that curve on the side of Shadow Valley which had already been the scene of several exciting events for the young railroader.

Now and then they flew past a closed station where only the night lamps and switch targets revealed life. The small hamlets near these stations, themselves endangered by the fire below—especially, if the wind rose—were all but deserted. All the able-bodied men had joined the State fire guard in opposing the forest fire.

Ralph could see at last the bottom of the valley. If the fire had been set, and for the purpose of overwhelming the railroad, the wind at first had been against the criminals' plans. It had spread in a direction away from the right of way.

The bottomlands of Shadow Valley were enveloped in crimson flames, and the smoke rising from this pit was borne northward and away from the line. But it was a veritable sea of fire!

A great dead pine that had been a landmark ever since Ralph had known this division suddenly sprang into flame as though it were by spontaneous combustion. It stood alone on a knoll and there was little but low brush near its base. Yet,

of a sudden, it was aflame from root to topmost twig!

"A few of 'em like that burning near the tracks would settle us!" thought the young engineer. "One at least would be sure to fall. If we headed into it—good-night!"

The men riding on the locomotive were all eagerness as the Flyer slid down the incline. Ralph could give but a glance now and then to the fire, for never had he watched the rails ahead more closely.

The warning he had received before leaving Rockton still loomed importantly in his mind. He was sure that had not referred to the wreck of Number 33. His own train was threatened with disaster!

His strained interest in Cherry Hopkins' fate, however, urged him to drive the Flyer as fast as he dared. The smooth slope into the heat and glow of the furnace-like valley tempted him to push the engine to the limit of her speed. Number 202 was actually flying before she was half way to the curve this side of the Devil's Den!

CHAPTER XXV

THROUGH THE FLAMING FOREST

AGAIN Ralph thought of the night when Zeph Dallas had leaped upon the bowlder beside the right of way and had waved him the signal "All's clear" as the Flyer took the curve above Devil's Den. But there was nobody on guard at this point, now.

Number 202 came rushing down to the dangerous point. Ralph shut off the throttle and applied the brakes with judgment. He knew that he was some minutes ahead of his schedule, but he hated to retard the train at all.

The wreck on the other side of the valley—the wreck of the train on which Cherry Hopkins had taken passage for Rockton—drew Ralph like a magnet. The news of the terrible disaster had shaken even the detectives riding on the locomotive.

The express took the curve. The track was clear to the next easy turn, right at the beginning of the trestle where the pillar had been blown out. A gang had been at work here putting in new

masonry to take the place of the impermanent pillar which now held up the trestle, but the forest fire to the north had called them off the job.

Every railroad employee who could possibly be spared, had been sent to aid the State fire guard. One man was here to watch the dangerous spot, and with his lantern he signaled the Midnight Flyer to come on.

Ralph ran on easily to the end of the trestle, and so over it and onto the firm ground beyond. He speeded up again. But now the heat of the flaming forest began to be felt even in the locomotive cab.

"Hey, Fairbanks!" shouted Frank Haley, the detective, in the engineer's ear. "Hey, you going to take the chance? I believe there is a backdraught. The fire is coming this way."

Ralph nodded, with grimly set lips. He had noted the cloud of flame-streaked smoke lying across the tracks not half a mile ahead. How wide was that cloud? Were the trees directly beside the right of way on fire now? What, indeed, was he driving the express into?

He gripped the reverse lever. A flashlike picture of his own train wrecked and in the midst of the flaming forest rose before Ralph's mental vision. Ought he to risk the unknown peril masked by the rose-hued cloud of drifting smoke?

But the thought of the wreck ahead called him on. Cherry in peril! Perhaps dying of her injuries. The thought was so enthralling that the young engineer could not bring himself to the reversal of the locomotive's mechanism and the pulling down of the heavy train. He did shut off some speed. They rolled into the cloud of smoke at less than thirty miles an hour. At that rate, he could have stopped the heavy train within a hundred yards.

The suspense, if not the heat from the fire, brought the perspiration out on Ralph Fairbanks' face as he leaned from the window. He shaded his eyes with his hand, trying to spy through the smother of smoke. The headlight's beam was dimmed by the cloud. Now and then tongues of flame seemed to leap through it, as though reaching to lap the locomotive.

Above and higher than the rumble of the train he now distinguished the roar of the conflagration. With it came the loud snapping of falling trees and explosions when dead timber burst from the heat of the fire that consumed it at the heart.

He realized that he was taking an awful chance, and he had taken it on his own responsibility. At any point the pilot might crash into some fallen monarch of the forest.

The heat came up into his face in a suffocating

wave. Ralph was forced to draw back into the cab. He had been wise enough to close the forward and first side window on his side of the locomotive. Embers—flaming and white-hot—began rattling against the glass.

A ball of fire—the torn-away top of some coniferous tree—hurtled overhead, barely missing the smokestack, and fell flaming and smoking upon the firemen's side of the boiler. The varnish began to smoke. Stilling leaped through the front window, ran along the board, and kicked the flaming bush off the locomotive.

The fire was sweeping closer and closer to the right of way. Ralph realized at last that he was driving into, not through, a belt of smoke and flame.

Ahead, and across the valley, the forest had ignited closer to the rails. The farther they went, the greater the danger.

This discovery was made too late, however. Ralph realized that it would be worse than ridiculous to stop and try to back out of the fire zone. The flames were being swept nearer and nearer to the tracks. He opened wide his throttle again and the Flyer drove at increased speed into whatever fate had in store for them.

The headlight seemed utterly quenched now by the glare of the fire. Smoke swirled into the

cab and filled their lungs. Choking and coughing, the detectives cowered on the deck. The fireman on duty at the furnace could scarcely see what he was about. Stilling, the other fireman, could see no more than Ralph could ahead of the locomotive.

Had the strikers or the ruffians employed in secret by Andy McCarrey imagined this situation they could easily have derailed the Midnight Flyer. Any obstacle on the track would have brought the fast train to grief. But if the forest fire was started by McCarrey's order, he expected that the fire itself would halt the trains on the division. His object, at most, was to throw the trains out of schedule, rather than to wreck the trains.

The Midnight Flyer's arrival at the basin of Shadow Valley a little ahead of her schedule, if anything, and the fact that Ralph Fairbanks was willing to take a chance overcame the conspiracy of the strike leaders. 202 came through the danger area without much hurt. The crew and detectives on the locomotives suffered the most. The train was a vestibule train for its entire length and the doors were kept closed. Such little heat and smoke as entered the ventilators was of small consequence.

In a few minutes the locomotive pilot burst

through the far side of the smoke-cloud. The headlight beamed along the rails again. The forest here lay untouched by fire on either side of the right of way.

Haley smote Ralph on the shoulder, a congratulatory blow.

"Good boy, Fairbanks!" he shouted. "I thought you were running us into a hot corner one while. But you certainly know your business. How far are we from that wreck?"

Ralph could figure that out exactly after a glance at the first numbered signpost. He increased the speed of the train on the instant.

Not far ahead now lay the scene of the disaster, of which they had secured so few particulars. Timber Brook, the little settlement mentioned in the message that had been passed up to him at Shadow Valley Station, was already in sight.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE WRECK

THERE was a red lamp out for the Flyer just beyond Timber Brook. Ralph pulled down to a crawl and set the pilot of his engine almost against the lamp that had been placed between the rails. Around the next turn was the wreckage of Number 33.

A white-faced section hand came to Ralph's side of the cab while the detectives climbed down and started ahead along the right of way.

"What happened to her?" the young engineer asked the laborer.

"They set up two ties between the rails and the old mill was thrown off the track. It carried half the train with it. Only one car—the smoker—overturned, but everybody was badly shaken up."

"How many killed?" gasped Ralph anxiously.

"Not a one. Lucky, I call it. And only a dozen or so hurt to any amount."

The hospital outfit that had come from Shadow Valley Station went by on a trot. Ralph was

eager to leave his post and to go forward to satisfy himself about Cherry Hopkins, but he could not do this at once.

He could not pull the train forward, for the locomotive of Number 33 was across the westbound track. Finally, after some minutes of suspense, he was informed by wire from the station just passed that the delayed Flyer was to remain where it was until the rails were cleared. He could not have run it back, anyway, for the fire was now burning on both sides of the right of way.

Leaving Stilling in command of the locomotive, and with the conductor's permission, Ralph finally got away and hurried around the curve to the scene of the eastbound train's wreck.

The wrecking train from Oxford was on the scene, and a big crew was at work clearing the rails. But Ralph saw that he would be very late when he pulled into Hammerfest that morning.

He saw Frank Haley, and the detective told him that, without a doubt, the wreck had been caused by ghouls working in the pay of the wildcat strike leaders.

"They knocked out one of our guards, and he only came to after the accident had occurred. He is in the hospital car. He tells me a curious thing, Fairbanks."

"What is that?" asked the young engineer.

"He says that at least one of the men who attacked him had his head and face muffled in a flour sack. He had cut a hole through it to see through. Didn't that fellow at Hardwell report that the bandit that held him up and robbed the station the other night was masked in that way?"

"He did. I talked with Fiske myself," Ralph agreed. "And I had my doubts then that the fellow was merely a robber. In this case it seems to be proved that he did not wreck the train to rob the passengers."

"Nothing like that! It was just a ghastly thing, planned to injure the road. If we could only connect this fellow in the flour-sack mask with Andy McCarrey and his co-workers, we would have a case that would surely send Andy over the road to the penitentiary."

"I hope you get the evidence," said Ralph heartily.

Ralph's interest, however, was much more closely held by another thing. Where was Cherry Hopkins? Had she been injured? Was she one of those who were in the hospital car that had been brought down from Oxford coupled to the wrecking train?

Leaving the detective, Ralph hurried to the

hospital car. A doctor who had come down from Shadow Valley Station was just coming out.

"Nothing much I can do," he said cheerfully. "Everybody is in good trim. A pretty case of compound fracture, a comminuted fracture of the left arm, a broken nose and possibly two cases of rib fracture—can't really tell without an X-ray examination. And——"

"But who are the cases, Doctor?" Ralph asked in anxiety. "Are they men or women, or—or girls?"

"No young people hurt at all. I should say the youngest patient was thirty-five years of age."

"Great!" exclaimed the young fellow, with a sigh of relief.

The doctor stared at him, then grinned. "You're a sympathetic person—I don't think!"

But Ralph did not stop to explain. He hurried away to mix with the passengers of the wrecked train who hung upon the fringe of the scene where the wreckers were hard at work. He saw few feminine passengers in these groups, and nowhere did he see the face and figure he was in search of.

He entered the cars still standing on the rails and walked through from one end to the other. Cherry Hopkins was in none of them. He

hesitated at first to speak to anybody about the girl, but finally he saw the conductor of the wrecked accommodation.

"Wait a moment, Mr. Carlton," said Ralph, holding the excited man by the sleeve. "Do you remember if the supervisor's daughter was one of your passengers to-night?"

"Supervisor Hopkins' girl?" exclaimed Carlton. "Why, yes, she was. I mind seeing her father's pass, viséed by him for her use. Yes, she came with us from Shelby Junction."

"So I understood," said Ralph. "Have you seen her since the accident?"

"Why, I— No, I haven't, Fairbanks!"

Ralph followed Carlton back through the train. Most of the women were gathered in one car. Carlton asked briskly if any of them had seen Miss Cherry, Supervisor Hopkins' daughter.

Several of the women remembered the girl.

"She was not hurt. I am sure of that," said one woman whose arm was in a sling, "for she helped bandage my arm. Then, it seems to me, she ran out of the car to see what was going on. I have not seen her since."

Nobody else remembered having seen her since soon after the wreck. Carlton, the conductor, had done all he could to aid Ralph in his quest. The latter was forced to go back to his own

train without finding the supervisor's daughter.

One thing that he had learned, however, quieted the young fellow's anxiety. It seemed quite sure that Cherry had not been hurt when Number 33 left the track. If she could help her fellow passengers after the accident, she was in no need of attention herself.

His relief was not so great, however, as he desired. He had not seen and spoken with the girl. Three hours later, when he finally got his train to Hammerfest, he wired the man he knew would be in charge of the train dispatching at Rockton, this question:

> "Find out for me secretly if Miss Hopkins has arrived with other passengers of wrecked 33."

Before he pulled out of Hammerfest on the return trip the answer to his question was handed up to him by the local telegraph operator:

> "No. Hop. is crazy. What do you know? Girl disappeared at scene of wreck."

CHAPTER XXVII

WHERE IS CHERRY?

THE responsibilities of the driver of a Class-A train such as Ralph Fairbanks conducted are not to be belittled. His mind must be given to the running of his locomotive, and that first of all, no matter what else may happen. Death or disaster must not swerve the engineer from his immediate duty.

The express back to Rockton was now the young fellow's charge. When he arrived at the scene of the morning wreck the eastbound way was clear again and he had to drive right on. With all his heart he desired to stop the locomotive, desert it, and make personal search about the neighborhood for some trace of the supervisor's daughter.

What could have happened to Cherry Hopkins? She surely had not been injured at the time of the wreck. Then what had become of her after she had run out of the car to view the wreckage closer?

In no possible way, as far as Ralph could see,

could Cherry have been hurt at a later time and her injury not reported. The train crew and passengers were all about her, or so it seemed reasonable to suppose, while she viewed the wreck. Her disappearance was a mysterious thing!

Ralph could not even pull down his locomotive at the place where Number 33 had been wrecked. He got the signal from the guard beside the tracks and had to push on. Despite the fire, that fortunately was now blowing away from the tracks, he made the run without any trouble and arrived at the Rockton terminal at 11:30.

The young engineer had no desire to see Mr. Barton Hopkins at this time. He learned from the day telegraph operator that nothing new about Cherry had been discovered. The supervisor had become wildly excited when he had tried to find his daughter and could not do so. It was positive that the girl had not arrived in town. She had surely disappeared at the scene of the wreck of Number 33.

Ralph did not go home at once after being relieved of his duty on the locomotive. Instead, he searched for Bob Adair. But the chief detective had not returned. It was believed he had gone down into Shadow Valley to examine into the wreck at first hand.

Ralph wondered if Mr. Adair was in the super-

visor's confidence. Had the road detective gone to Shadow Valley to look for Cherry Hopkins? The young fellow was tempted greatly to take the first train for the vicinity of the morning's disaster!

Again, and quite involuntarily, Ralph found himself passing through the street on which the Hopkins family lived. He hesitated at the door of the bungalow, then ventured up the walk and rang the bell. A maid servant came to the door.

She started back and half closed the door when she saw Ralph in his overalls and cap. It was evident that she had been warned against receiving employees of the railroad.

"What do you want?" demanded the girl sharply.

"I don't suppose Mr. Hopkins is at home?" asked Ralph.

"You know he ain't supposed to be home at this time of day."

"And—and hasn't Miss Cherry returned?"

The maid broke out crying. "Ain't you heard? She's dead—or lost—or something. Her father is 'most crazy about it——"

"And Mrs. Hopkins?" Ralph interrupted. "What does she think?"

"They don't dare tell her. Anyway, Mrs. Hopkins isn't here. They took her last evening

to Dr. Poole's sanitarium. She's going under an operation. Miss Cherry was coming back to be with her."

"That's tough," muttered Ralph, turning away.

He went home feeling much disturbed. Mrs. Fairbanks had not only obtained some news of the wreck at Shadow Valley, but she had got a garbled account of Supervisor Hopkins' family troubles.

"They have taken that poor woman to the sanitarium, and they say he won't let the girl come home to her mother," Ralph's mother said, quite excitedly. "Somebody ought to talk to that Barton Hopkins."

"Hold on! Hold on!" advised her son. "This is one time when that 'little bird' of yours has got the news wrong. I positively know that Mr. Hopkins sent for Cherry to return. She left Shelby Junction last night on the ten-forty train —Number Thirty-three."

"Why, Ralph, that was the train that was wrecked!"

"Yes, Mother," the young fellow replied with more gravity. "And, believe me, I'm worried enough. The Flyer was held up two hours and more by the wreck of Thirty-three. I got a chance to search for Cherry. She wasn't there. She's lost—disappeared."

"Disappeared?" his mother cried, in amazement.

"Yes. She was aboard the train. The conductor remembered her. Ladies told me they saw her after the train was derailed. She was all right then. But she was not to be found when I inquired, and she did not reach Rockton with the other passengers."

"This is awful, Ralph! What does Mr. Hopkins say?"

"I don't know. I'm sure I don't want to see him. But Mr. Adair has gone over to Shadow Valley, and perhaps he has gone to look for Cherry. My gracious! I'd like to go myself. If I hadn't promised the G. M. that I would stick to the Midnight Flyer, I would be tempted right now to throw up my job and join any search party that may look for Cherry."

"Are you afraid the strikers have something to do with her disappearance, Ralph?" asked his mother.

"I'm afraid of what that Andy McCarrey might do. I have said from the start that this was a personal fight between McCarrey and the super. And Hopkins can be hurt, and hurt badly, through Cherry."

"And his poor wife ill as she is, too! It is dreadful," repeated Mrs. Fairbanks. "I do wish

you could help look for her, my boy; although I wouldn't want you to get into any trouble."

"Oh, that would be all right. I am not afraid of trouble. But I can't go back on the G. M. He is my best friend."

His mother was thinking deeply.

"Ralph, my boy," she said, of a sudden, "isn't it true that Zeph disappeared down there in Shadow Valley?"

"That's true enough, Mother. But Zeph is a different person. He can take care of himself. He is not a delicate girl, helpless in the hands of such villains as Andy McCarrey and his associates. Cherry——"

"I was just thinking," said the widow, "that Zeph might have been captured and imprisoned by the same men and in the same place as the supervisor's girl. Isn't it possible?"

"Humph! That's an idea! I had forgotten Zeph since Cherry disappeared. But it might be. Indeed, it is more than likely so. Now I wonder just where Andy McCarrey is right now? That man they tell of in the flour-sack mask could not be him. But, then——"

He was more than puzzled and disturbed. Ralph was downright frightened on account of Cherry Hopkins. And now he began to wonder if he ought not to take Mr. Hopkins into his con-

fidence. Although it seemed that the supervisor must know as much about the disappearance of his daughter as Ralph did.

Actually the person the young engineer desired most to consult was the road's chief detective. But he heard nothing of that gentleman that day or in the evening when he went down town early. There was a buzz of excitement about the terminal offices, however, and Ralph learned that while he had slept at home several important events had occurred.

The police had raided the old tenement in which Ralph and Zeph Dallas had had their adventure at night with Whitey Malone and the chief strike leaders, Andy McCarrey and Griffin Falk. Intoxicated men coming out of the place had been seen and a supply of liquor was found in the very upstairs room into which Ralph had peered.

But the attempt to arrest McCarrey or Falk in the place had failed. They had been warned of the raid and had got out. Indeed, it was believed they had left town.

Another important thing was that Jim Perrin of the old shopmen's union had been suspended from his office. Certain men who had been close to the traitorous Perrin were likewise under a cloud, especially Billy Lyon, Abe Bertholdt, Mike Ranny and Sam Peters. The split in the shop-

men's union was being healed. It was even prophesied by some that the wildcat strike would be ended as far as the shopworkers of Rockton were concerned within a few hours.

These bits of news were encouraging in a general way, but Ralph Fairbanks' interest lay in an entirely different direction now. Much as he had been worried about railroad affairs, in his mind the disappearance of Cherry Hopkins at the scene of the wreck in Shadow Valley loomed up as being far more important.

Ralph went up to the dispatchers' offices to talk over the schedule with his substitute, and, also, to learn of any news that might be rife in that department. Naturally, the boys there knew little about Supervisor Hopkins and his troubles.

"Just the same, the lads tell me," said Johnny, who was Ralph's old assistant, "that Hopkins is getting rattled. He has stopped hunting for faults to correct in our division system. They say he's got a sick wife and that his girl has run away from him."

"Bother gossip!" exclaimed Ralph heatedly. "Miss Hopkins has been kidnapped, if anybody should ask you. No doubt of that. I am sorry for Hopkins."

As he went down to the train-shed platform he passed the door of the telegraph room. The

operator had just been called to the instrument. Ralph could not resist halting to listen.

He was a quick and perfect reader of the sounder. And almost instantly his interest was caught and held by the message coming over the wire. In the first place it came from Timber Brook. At this hour Timber Brook Station, near the spot where Thirty-three had been wrecked, should be closed for the night.

The message came haltingly. The operator sending seemed to be a regular "ham," as the telegraph fraternity call a poor sender. But Ralph could not mistake the meaning of what came over the wire:

"B. HOPKINS, Super:

"If you want to see your girl again you know who to communicate with and what it will cost you. Be quick. We will not wait long. We want satisfaction."

Ralph could not keep back an excited ejaculation. The operator swung about to look at him.

"What—what do you think of that?" he gasped.

"Get a repeat!" exclaimed the young engineer. "That wasn't the regular operator at Timber Brook."

"Not much! It was a rank amateur." The operator was repeating the distant station's call —TB, TB, TB, in staccato. There was no reply. The wire was dead. "It must be a fake."

"No fake at all," returned Ralph hastily. "Where is Mr. Hopkins?"

"He told me he was going to the hospital to see how his wife was, and he would be back. Here he is!"

Ralph wheeled. The supervisor came striding to the door of the telegraph room. He scowled as usual at Ralph. Then he asked the operator:

"Anything doing?"

The man hesitated for a moment. Then, in silence, he handed the supervisor the record he had made of the strange telegraph message.

CHAPTER XXVIII

RALPH ON THE TRAIL

RALPH FAIRBANKS had stepped back under the inimical glare of the supervisor's look. At that moment he had been ready to forget Mr. Hopkins' unkindness and unfairness to him. But the man's plain dislike aroused renewed antagonism in Ralph's mind. He turned away and, in spite of the tugging at his own heartstrings, was prepared to ignore the supervisor's trouble. His worst fears for Cherry had been realized, and he suspected that the blow to her father would be well nigh overwhelming.

Swinging his dinner can, the young engineer went down the platform, approaching the big locomotive he drove and which had just been brought up from the roundhouse by his faithful firemen. But before he arrived beside the engine he heard a cry and the quick pounding of feet upon the cement. He glanced back over his shoulder.

Supervisor Hopkins, white-faced and staring, was tearing along after him, waving the telegram

in his hand. The man was utterly beside himself. At last the strain of all his troubles and anxieties had broken him. One would scarcely have recognized the erstwhile stern and uncompromising supervisor who had, within four months, managed to create so much disturbance on this division of the Great Northern Railway.

"Pull out! Pull out!" he cried, seizing Ralph's arm and hustling him toward the steps of the huge locomotive.

"Can't pull out for four minutes, Mr. Hopkins," Ralph said, trying to keep his own voice and manner placid. "The schedule——"

"Hang the schedule!" cried this former exponent of method and exactness. "Do you know what has happened? Those demons!" He shook the paper in his hand. "Do you know what they have done, Fairbanks?"

"I read the message off the wire," returned the young fellow coolly. "I have been afraid all along that Andy McCarrey's gang had something to do with Miss Cherry's disappearance."

"It is those bloodthirsty strikers!" gasped Hopkins.

"The strikers are not bloodthirsty. *They* are men who have worked for the railroad for years. Some of them are my neighbors and friends. They have been badly advised in this strike, I

admit. But I doubt if a single ex-employee of this division has had anything to do with this beastly thing."

"This message——"

"You were threatened before. I guess you were threatened before you came to Rockton, Mr. Hopkins," said Ralph quickly. "You are pretty sure who is the moving spirit in this dastardly crime."

"McCarrey. Yes, I know that. But he has men to help him. I must get to Shadow Valley at once——"

The gong in the train-shed roof sounded. Ralph started up the steps of the locomotive. Hopkins remained right at his elbow.

"You get a seat in one of the coaches where you will be comfortable, Mr. Hopkins," advised Ralph. "I'll get you to the place you want to reach as quickly as I can."

"I'll ride with you. Want me to write a pass for myself?" the excited supervisor asked. "In the locomotive I will be that much nearer the place this message came from."

"Come aboard, then," said Ralph, not even smiling. "We'll waive the pass for this once."

"All aboard!" called out the conductor from the end of the train.

Ralph leaped to his seat and seized the lever.

The supervisor followed him into the cab. You should have seen the eyes of the two firemen!

Supervisor Hopkins was certainly shaking. Out of the corner of his eye Ralph watched those long, lean, red hands twitching nervously.

"Maybe he has been under this pressure all the time," Ralph considered. "It might be. He is as close-mouthed as a clam. Anybody can see that. Mr. Barton Hopkins would never confide in any person as long as he could keep his self-control. My gracious! I never saw him so broken up."

While Ralph was thinking these thoughts he was speeding up the great eight-wheeler. The train, gaining on its pace with each revolution of the drivers, left the Rockton yard behind. It whirled up the small slope beyond, and then the searchlight, like a bright index finger, pointed the way into the black cavern of the cloudy night.

Suddenly the young engineer realized that Mr. Hopkins' fingers were quiet. He sat on the bench without fidgeting as he had at first. Ralph could even sense that the man breathed regularly.

He turned in some surprise to look into Barton Hopkins' face. What had changed him in this brief time? The supervisor's gaze was fixed upon Ralph's left hand, the hand which rested all the time on the throttle.

Faster and faster the train sped on. As he had promised, the young fellow was sending the Midnight Flyer on at the best pace he could compass. Never during the time he had handled the train had he made better time.

On and on they rushed, the wheels drumming over the rail-joints with a rhythm of sound that could only be compared to faint rifle-fire. Again and again the whistle sent its warning through the night. They rushed past little stations and parti-colored switch targets as though they were merely painted upon the backdrop of the night.

Now and then a white flash told Ralph that Adair's guards were still on duty. "All's well" they signaled, and he dared keep the heavy train at top speed over stretches of road which ordinarily would call for more cautious driving.

The lights of Fryberg finally came into view. Distant specks like star-shine at first. Almost immediately they were slowing down for the town and the bell was jangling. Ralph brought the train to a wonderfully easy stop.

Not for a moment had he been troubled by the presence of the supervisor behind him on the seat. He was so sure of himself that he was never ruffled by being watched at his work.

But as the locomotive came panting to its stop

Barton Hopkins put a now quite steady hand upon Ralph Fairbanks' shoulder.

"A wonderful run, Fairbanks," he said, in his usual stern voice. "I had no idea you were such a master of your art. I could give you nothing but praise for your work. And you have gained three minutes over the schedule. I thank you."

For some reason Ralph felt a lump in his throat. There was something a bit pathetic in the supervisor's honest assurance that he appreciated what little Ralph could do for him. The young fellow understood that the man's keen interest in the way the engineer handled his locomotive had aided to calm him and had helped him gain control of himself.

They went on from Fryberg to Shadow Valley Station at a speed quite in keeping with the first stretch of the run. There was no red glow in the sky ahead to-night. When Ralph had returned from Hammerfest the day before the area of the forest fire had been much reduced.

Again the Flyer made the swift plunge into the valley. They rounded the curves and crossed the trestle at the Devil's Den in safety. Under instructions from the supervisor, the train was pulled down at Timber Brook Station. Ralph could not stop to learn if anything had happened there of moment.

The supervisor got down on the lower step of the cabin and made a flying leap to the cinder path. He waved his hand to Ralph as the latter speeded up the train again. Then the lights of the little station and the tall figure of the supervisor were shut out of his sight.

The Midnight Flyer made another of her famous runs that morning, and Ralph brought her to Hammerfest in ample season for the connection on the Boise City road. Although he had closely applied himself to the running of the train, Ralph's mind was hot with thoughts of the mystery of Cherry Hopkins' disappearance.

Something his mother had said regarding Zeph Dallas's dropping out of sight shuttled to and fro in his thought; and at last it pointed to a fixed fact. He thought he saw a way of helping Hopkins find the place of captivity of his lost daughter.

But to put this idea to the test he must have freedom. He rushed to the telegraph office the minute he was free of the locomotive and began to put in requests for the master mechanic. But that individual was at neither end of the division, and at that early hour of the day he could not be found.

While Ralph in his anxiety was striving to reach Mr. Connoly and was waiting outside the

telegraph office, he saw an accommodation from the west pull in, to the tail of which was attached a very familiar private car. He could have tossed up his cap in glee as he started on a run for the end of the platform.

Before he reached the private car the general manager stepped down and approached the station. He hailed Ralph genially.

"Oh, yes, this *is* your end of run, isn't it, Ralph? How are you?"

"Terribly troubled, sir," admitted the young engineer.

"It seems your whole division is troubled," grumbled the general manager. "I have been wondering, boy, if you were not right when you said that an official should be able to see things from the men's standpoint. This Hopkins——"

"Don't say another word against him!" gasped Ralph. "Let me tell you!"

And he proceeded to do so—to tell the genial general manager the particulars of everything that had happened within his ken on the division since Barton Hopkins' drastic rules had begun to create friction. But mainly Ralph gave the details of the wreck in Shadow Valley, what had led up to it, and what had now resulted from it. His text was, after all, Cherry Hopkins.

"You mean to say those blackguards have

stolen the supervisor's daughter?" cried the general manager. "Why, the State police ought to be out after them."

"Here's the boy who ought to be after them," declared Ralph boldly, pointing to himself, and he went on to sketch for the general manager his own belief of what should be done in the matter of searching for Cherry.

"If I could get excused from this run back to Rockton I'd be able to do something. If they haven't found her down there in Shadow Valley, I believe I can. I'll get back to Rockton in time to take out the Midnight Flyer to-night."

"Is there an engineer here able to take over your locomotive?"

"Ben Rogers is the man!" exclaimed Ralph. "I'll put him wise to everything before we reach Timber Brook."

"Go to it then, boy!" exclaimed the general manager. "I am sorry for Barton Hopkins. Until this strike came he was saving money right and left for the Great Northern. It is a pity that he has been under this strain—if he has—all this time. I hope Adair is helping him."

Ralph had been quite sure that Bob Adair was giving his full attention to the kidnapping of Cherry Hopkins, and when he dropped off his locomotive at Timber Brook he was so assured.

For he chanced to meet Mr. Adair right at the little station.

When they had exchanged news, Ralph found that the chief detective had not thought of the point that Mrs. Fairbanks had put into her son's mind. The detectives had spent all the morning with Mr. Hopkins in beating the forest on either side of the road—even the burned area—for some trace of a hideout that the villains might use.

It was learned that the Timber Brook Station had been broken into, and one of the kidnappers had sent that message to Mr. Hopkins which Ralph had heard off the wire. But otherwise, nobody had seen any suspicious person about the right of way since the wreck of Thirty-three.

"Come on!" said Ralph excitedly. "I believe my mother has the right idea. At any rate, Mr. Adair, don't you think it is worth putting to the test?"

Bob Adair agreed, and they started at once toward the Devil's Den.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE RUN IS ENDED

RALPH, with Mr. Hopkins, Adair, and several of the latter's assistants, got aboard a dirt train going across to the Devil's Den where the replaced pillar under the trestle was still in course of construction. Once there, they could easily walk up the grade to that point where the young engineer had seen fluttering from the bushes on the side of the cliff certain articles of apparel which he believed belonged to his friend, Zeph Dallas.

The ragged remains of the vest and shirt still clung there. The cap had probably been blown away. The forest fire had not run up the face of the crag, so the wearing apparel had not been destroyed.

"Now, it is a fact," Ralph put forth, "that Zeph hasn't been seen since the night the Flyer was pulled down here for that flaming scarecrow when the pillar at Devil's Den was blown out. Nor has he been heard from, has he?"

"Not a sign of him," agreed Adair.

"Then make up your mind he went up this cliff, and by that path. He probably followed the rascals who dynamited the pillar. He was so eager that he could not even wait to see if I got his fire signal and stopped the train."

"That would be just like him," admitted Bob Adair again.

"Zeph discarded his vest, and then his shirt and cap, to mark his trail. I believe it should have been followed before."

"That sounds reasonable," said Mr. Hopkins. "But that was some time ago. What do you suppose has happened to him since?"

"He was captured by the men he followed. That goes without saying. I don't believe they would have killed the boy," said the chief detective. "But they would hold him prisoner."

"Just as they are holding my daughter," groaned out Mr. Hopkins.

"Not for ransom, in Zeph's case," said Adair grimly. "They know nobody would give a dollar for him."

"I'd give everything I've got for him!" cried Ralph, in some heat.

"Well, now, come to think of it," said Adair, with twinkling eyes, "I don't know but I'd give something myself to see Zeph clear of the rascals."

"I guess you would!" exclaimed Ralph. "Zeph will try anything once, but he is something more than a nut. He is faithful and brave and a mighty good friend!"

However, they wasted little time in discussing the fine possibilities of the situation. Ralph knew the path up the crag pretty well, and he led the way. Two of the detective police were left below with rifles to watch for any person who might appear above to obstruct the climbers.

To climb that cliff at night must have been hard work. But by daylight Ralph and his companions did not find it particularly difficult. In half an hour they approached the summit of the ascent.

On the way Ralph had made sure that the rags of garments still hanging to the brush had actually belonged to Zeph Dallas. He even found the yellow brown cap that had fallen upon a shelf of rock. At any rate, Zeph had passed this way and must have left the articles for some good and sufficient reason.

"He expected to get into trouble, or he already was in trouble," Ralph said to Mr. Adair. "Think of him shedding his clothes in this way!"

"I have got through wondering about Zeph," admitted the chief detective. "He is always breaking out in a new spot."

Ralph, however, could not feel so sure that his friend was all right. As he led the way "over the top" he almost feared to find Zeph's dead body lying on the rocks.

But the first thing he found was somebody very much alive. As Ralph scrambled over the lip of the last shelf of rock a figure suddenly popped into view. The head and shoulders of a man appeared just above the young fellow. And to the latter's surprise, those head and shoulders were shrouded in a flour sack on which the red and green lettering was faintly visible.

"Here he is!" yelled Ralph, and sprang up and grabbed the fellow. The latter had a club which he tried to use, but he had been so amazed by the appearance of the young engineer and his party that he was quickly overpowered.

In fact, Ralph was astride the fellow's body and was tearing off the mask when Mr. Adair and Mr. Hopkins reached the ledge of rock. Ralph exposed the flaxen head and foolish face of Whitey Malone!

"We've got him, anyway, on the count of highway robbery," said Mr. Adair, with satisfaction.

"What does he know about my daughter?" demanded the supervisor.

"He'd better tell at once," said the chief detective, "or we may throw him over the cliff."

This threat he made with a wink to Mr. Hopkins and Ralph; but Whitey did not see that wink! He was scared to the marrow of his bones, especially when he was dragged to the edge of the rock.

"I'll show you! I'll tell!" he cried. "But Andy will kill me."

"You tell the truth," Mr. Adair promised, "and you will be out of jail a good many years before Andy McCarrey gets through paying the penalty for *his* crimes."

It was a point that even Whitey Malone could appreciate. Much as he feared McCarrey and Griffin Falk, the weak-minded fellow knew that he could save himself much trouble by telling all he knew to the representatives of the law.

Back from the verge of this cliff in a thick wood was an old charcoal burner's cabin. Zeph Dallas, in attempting to follow McCarrey's ruffians who had dynamited the trestle pillar (Whitey had not been in that crime) was captured, as Ralph believed, and was held prisoner in the charcoal burner's shack.

At the time of the wreck of Number 33 in Shadow Valley, some of these same employees of McCarrey, lurking in the bushes, had recognized Cherry Hopkins and had seized her during the confusion. Binding her and muffling her

cries, the rascals had taken her by a roundabout way to the same shack in which Zeph was held prisoner.

With this information wrenched from the reluctant Whitey, Ralph, Supervisor Hopkins, Adair and his men, went on to the cabin. They approached it with much care, for a large band of the outlaws were on guard.

Ralph and Mr. Adair, who were well informed regarding the identity of the striking shopmen, saw no ex-railroad employee in the clearing where the shack stood. But McCarrey and his chief henchman, Falk, were there.

Without doubt, although McCarrey had wormed himself into the confidence of the dissatisfied shopmen and other employees of the division, he had done so merely for his own personal aggrandizement. He hated the supervisor of the division and he had worked merely to control the strike fund of the ill-advised railroaders and to hurt Mr. Barton Hopkins.

Chance, it seemed, had put Cherry into the power of this scoundrel. When he heard that she had been captured he left Rockton immediately and took up his personal fight against the supervisor. He knew Hopkins had some money and he was determined to make him ransom his daughter.

With this knowledge in their possession, Ralph and his companions attacked the gang at the charcoal burner's shack with considerable determination. Although they had firearms, they did not have to use them. Advancing under the chief detective's direction on the clearing from all sides, the rescuers clubbed their men down, frightening them as much as they injured them.

While the men were fighting, Ralph ran to the door of the shack. He had already heard Zeph's hoarse voice shouting. Ralph burst in the door with a stone, shattering the lock.

As he did so a man hurled himself upon the young railroader. Although the attack was sudden and from the rear, the young fellow knew that his antagonist was Andy McCarrey.

"I've got *you,* anyway!" growled out the chief of the band of scoundrels. "You got into that house one night. I remember you! And I bet you gave us away."

He was much stronger than Ralph, and having jumped on him from behind, he bore the youth to the ground. He was astride Ralph in an instant, and seized upon the very dornick with which his captive had broken the lock of the door.

In a moment the young railroader might have been seriously hurt—even killed! But rescue in the shape of Mr. Barton Hopkins himself arrived

in season. Reaching the spot with a clubbed rifle in his hands, the supervisor landed the stock of the weapon on the side of McCarrey's head with such force that the villain toppled over, quite *hors de combat* for the time being.

Before Ralph could rise the supervisor had sprung to the door of the shack and thrown it open. The afternoon sunlight flooded into the interior of the place and Barton Hopkins saw his daughter, bound to a rude chair and gagged with a cloth tied across her face.

The anxious father was the first to reach the girl. He swiftly cut her bonds and tore off the bandage while Ralph staggered to an inner door, that of a closet where Zeph Dallas was confined.

"Great Jupiter and little fishes!" gasped Zeph hoarsely, when he saw Ralph's face. "You've been a long time coming. And they've got a girl in prison here, too."

"They haven't got anybody in prison now," said Mr. Adair's cheerful voice from the doorway. "We've got them—and a fine bunch they are. That was a nice swipe you gave Andy, Mr. Hopkins. It ought to be some satisfaction to you to know that he will have to have some new teeth if he ever wants to chew his victuals on that side of his jaw."

The situation had been a serious one, neverthe-

less, for it was later proved that several of the men McCarrey had in his band had prison records and were desperate criminals. The threat to injure the girl if her father did not pay for her release might not have been an empty one.

"However," said Mr. Adair, as the friends and the supervisor and Cherry made their way to Rockton on an evening train, "this not only cleans up the McCarrey band, but it is the end of the wildcat strike. I don't know that you had been so informed, Mr. Hopkins, but a committee of the striking shopmen, and from the old union, will wait on you to-morrow, and if you handle the situation wisely everything will be going smoothly very soon."

"Perhaps I have been too stringent in my rules," the supervisor said slowly. "At least, I will consider what the men have to offer."

Cherry, hearing her father say this, nodded brightly to Ralph and squeezed his hand for a moment. "I believe you did something to help convince father that he was wrong about the railroad workers," she whispered to her friend.

"As for the strikers themselves," went on Mr. Adair, "the union will get rid of Jim Perrin and those that helped him betray the union members to McCarrey. I was able to prove to the union heads their treachery through the written list

Ralph got from Malone that night and the warning Perrin slipped into Ralph's engine the night Thirty-three was wrecked. Undoubtedly Perrin believed McCarrey meant to try again to wreck the Flyer."

"How did he come to consider Ralph at all?" asked Mr. Hopkins. "Is Perrin such a close friend of yours?" and he asked the question directly of the young man.

"I'll tell you," confessed the other. "Some time ago Perrin's crippled daughter—a sweet little girl—needed to be treated at one of the big Eastern hospitals. Mother and I—more mother than me," added Ralph, "were able to assist in sending the child there. She has come back cured and I expect, Perrin was grateful."

It was evident that Mr. Hopkins' estimation of Ralph Fairbanks increased by leaps and bounds during that run to Rockton. When it was ended the supervisor shook hands warmly with the young fellow before he hastened his daughter away in a taxicab to the hospital, to see her mother.

"I see I have a good deal to thank you for, Fairbanks," the supervisor said. "Believe me, I shall not forget it."

However, it was a month before Ralph saw much more of the Hopkins family, even of

Cherry. During that time he continued to drive Number 202, and the troubles of all kinds on the division gradually cleared up.

Then another engineer was found to relieve Ralph, and he went back to his desk as chief dispatcher for the division. It was the evening of this day that he kept his first dinner engagement at the Hopkins' bungalow and met the recovered wife and mother at her own table.

Beside Ralph, too, there sat Mrs. Fairbanks. They found that Barton Hopkins, when he wished to be, could be a very charming host. And Mrs. Fairbanks, as they walked homeward after dinner, repeated to her son something she had already said about Cherry:

"That girl is well worth knowing, Ralph."

"I'll tell the world!" agreed the young train dispatcher.

THE END

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